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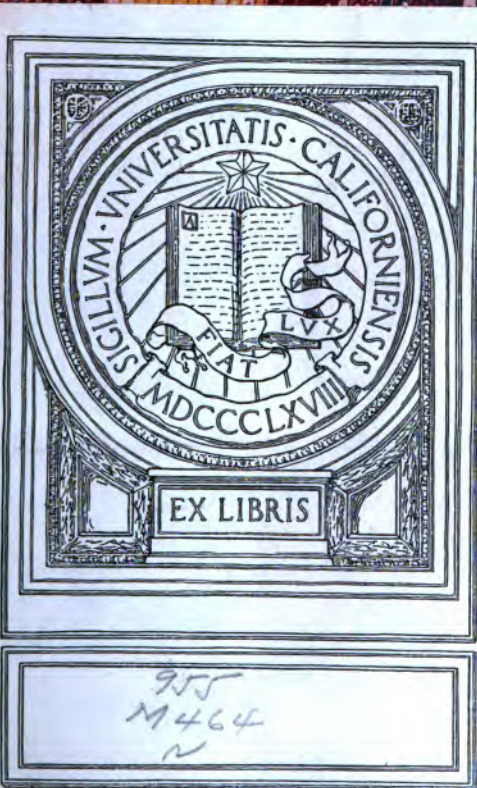


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RUPERT GODWIN

BY THE AUTHOR OF

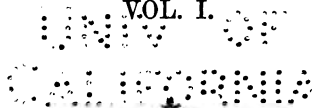
“LADY AUDLEY'S SECRET”

ETC. ETC. ETC.

Mrs. Mary E. (Braddon) Maxwell.

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. I.



LONDON

WARD, LOCK, AND TYLER

WARWICK HOUSE, PATERNOSTER ROW

M DCCC LXVII

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TO THE
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PUBLISHERS' ANNOUNCEMENT.



Rupert Godwin was written for, and first appeared in, a cheap Weekly Journal. From this source the Tale was translated into the French language, and ran as the leading story in the *Journal pour Tous*. It was there discovered by an American, who re-translated the matter back into English, and who obtained an outlet for the new translation in the columns of the *New-York Mercury*. These and other versions have been made without the slightest advantage to the Author; or, indeed, without the faintest approach to any direct communication to her on the subject. Influenced by the facts as here stated, the Author has revised the original, and now offers the result for what it is, namely, a Tale of Incident written to amuse the short intervals of leisure which the readers of popular

periodicals can snatch from their daily avocations; and also as a work that has not been published in England, except in the crude and fragmentary shape already mentioned.

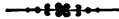
WARWICK HOUSE, PATERNOSTER ROW,
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CONTENTS OF VOL. I.



CHAP.	PAGE
I. A SAD FAREWELL	1
II. RUPERT GODWIN THE BANKER	21
III. AN IMPORTUNATE CREDITOR	48
IV. A NEW WAY TO PAY OLD DEBTS	69
V. LOVE'S YOUNG DREAM	98
VI. THE STORY OF THE PAST	114
VII. THE STOLEN LETTER	140
VIII. THE DAY OF DESOLATION	162
IX. A PITILESS CLAIMANT	175
X. HIDDEN IN THE YEW-TREE	188
XI. HOMELESS AND FRIENDLESS	213
XII. MATERNAL MANCEUVRES	230
XIII. A DAUGHTER'S TRIAL	260
XIV. LOVE AT SIGHT	271
XV. VIOLET RESOLVES UPON ENTERING A NEW SPHERE	283
XVI. BEHIND THE SCENES	307
XVII. CRUEL KINDNESS	320

RUPERT GODWIN.



CHAPTER I.

A SAD FAREWELL.

IN a charming residence, half cottage, half manor-house, embosomed in the woodland scenery of Hampshire, lived a family who might have formed the model for a poet's ideal of domestic happiness. The home-circle was not a large one. It consisted of only four persons — Captain Harley Westford, of the merchant service, his wife, son, and daughter. The Captain and his wife were both in the fairest prime of middle age. Life for them seemed at its brightest and best. Clara

Westford's girlish beauty might, indeed, have vanished with the snows of departed winters, the blossoms of bygone spring-times; but another kind of beauty had succeeded—the calm loveliness of the matron whose life has been cloudless as one long summer's day, pure as the untrodden snows of some far Alpine region.

Yes; she was very lovely still. Beauty has its Indian summer, and the glory of that later splendour is scarcely less than the early freshness of spring-time. Mrs. Westford possessed even a rarer charm than mere perfection of face or figure. Every look, every movement, was instinct with that indefinable grace for which we can find no better name than good breeding. She had that winning manner which the French call graciousness. Those who were intimate with the Captain and his wife whispered that Clara Westford came of a nobler race than that of her husband. It was said that she had left the house

of a wealthy father, to begin the battle of life with the frank, genial, handsome merchant sailor, and that she had thus made herself for ever an outcast from the family to which she belonged.

No one knew the real story of that runaway marriage. The Captain and his wife kept the secrets of the past locked in their own breasts. Mrs. Westford could very seldom be induced to speak of her marriage; but when she did speak, it was always in words that expressed the pride she felt in her husband.

“I know that his family has no place amongst Burke’s landed gentry, and that his grandfather was a trader on the high seas, like himself,” she would say; “but I also know that his name is honoured by the few to whom it is familiar, and that in his native town, Westford and honesty are synonymous terms.”

Only one shadow ever darkened that rustic

dwelling among the verdant woods and fair spreading pastures of Hampshire; and that shadow was a very terrible one.

It came when the husband and father was obliged to leave the dear ones who made his home a kind of paradise for him. Partings were very frequent in that simple household. The Captain's professional duties called him often away to scenes of peril and tempest, far from that happy nook in peaceful England.

To-day the June sunshine is bright on the lawn and flower-beds in the Captain's garden; but the shadow comes with the sunshine, and the bright midsummer noontide is an hour of sadness for the seaman's household.

The Captain and his wife are walking slowly, arm in arm, under the shelter of a long alley of hazel and filbert trees. It is a lovely day at the close of June; the roses are in their fullest splendour; the deep blue sky is unshadowed by a

cloud; the hum of bees and carolling music of birds make all the air melodious with nature's simple harmonies; a thousand butterflies are fluttering above the flower-beds on the smooth lawn before the windows of the old Grange. Every quaint diamond-paned casement and broad mulioned window winks and blinks in the warm sunlight, till the old house seems full of eyes. The yellow stone-crop on the gabled roof, the deep crimson of the brick-work, are sharply defined against an ultramarine sky, and make a picture that would gladden the eyes of a pre-Raphaelite. The sunshine steeps every leaf and every flower in its warm radiance—it floods the trees with silvery light, it transforms and glorifies the commonest objects, until the earth seems unfamiliar and beautiful as fairyland.

On such a day as this it seems almost impossible to believe that sorrow or heartache can have any existence upon this glorified earth; we

almost forget that hearts can break amid beauty and sunshine.

Clara Westford's noble face is pale and wan this sunny morning. Dark circles surround her eyes—earnest eyes, from whose clear depths the very soul of truth looks out. All through the past night this true-hearted wife has watched and wept on her knees before Him who can alone protect the wanderer.

“O, Harley,” she exclaimed, in a low, tremulous voice, while her slender fingers tightened their grasp upon the Captain's arm, “it is so bitter—so bitter; almost too bitter to bear. We have parted often before to-day; and yet to-day, for the first time, the anguish of parting seems more than I can endure.”

There was a look of agony in the wife's pale face, as she turned it towards her husband, that expressed even more than her passionate words. There were no tears in the large violet-hued eyes;

but there was a quivering motion about the compressed lips that betrayed a world of suffering.

At sea, or in any hour of peril and contest, Harley Westford possessed the courage of a lion; but the aspect of his wife's grief transformed him into the veriest coward. He strove manfully, however, to conceal his emotion, and it was in a tone of affected gaiety that he replied to Mrs. Westford.

“My darling,” he exclaimed, “this is really foolish, and quite unworthy of a seaman's wife, who should have a soul above fear. This parting ought not to be a hard one; for is not this to be my last voyage? After this one trip to China, by which I hope to make a sackful of golden guineas for you and the dear ones, I mean to settle down for the rest of my life in this dear old Grange, a regular landsman, a gentleman farmer, if you like; going in for pigs, and prize cattle, and monster turnips, and all that kind of thing, like a country

squire to the manner born. Why, Clara, you ought not to shed a tear, this time!"

"There are no tears in my eyes, Harley," his wife answered, in the same low, faltering voice, so terribly expressive of mental anguish; "there is something in my sorrow too deep for tears. I have shed tears always on the day of our parting, and I know that my cowardly weakness has often unmanned you, Harley; but I can shed no tears to-day. There is an awful terror in my heart. My dreams for the last week have been full of trouble and foreboding. My prayers last night brought no consolation. It seemed to me as if Heaven was deaf to my cries. I feel like some unhappy wretch who wanders blindfold upon the brink of a precipice—every step may plunge me into an abyss of darkness and horror. O, Harley, Harley, have pity upon me! I know there is danger in this voyage—deadly, unseen peril. Do not go! Have

mercy upon my anguish, Harley, and do not go!"

Again the slender hands tightened convulsively upon the sailor's arm. It seemed as if the agonised wife would have held her husband despite himself in that passionate grasp.

Captain Westford smiled sadly.

"My darling," he said, "foolish as I know your fears to be, I might perhaps indulge them if my word were not pledged to this voyage; but my word is pledged. And when did Harley Westford ever break his promise? There is not a sailor amongst my crew who does not look forward to this trip as a means of taking home comfort to his wife and little ones. They all confide in me as if I were their brother as well as their captain; and I know their plans, poor fellows, and the disappointment they would feel if anything prevented the voyage. No, darling, you must be bold and brave, like a true-hearted

sailor's wife as you are. The Lily Queen—your ship, Clara; christened after you, the queen of all earthly lilies—the Lily Queen sails from London Docks at daybreak to-morrow, and, if he lives, Harley Westford sails with her!”

The wife knew that all further remonstrance was useless. She knew that her husband valued his word and honour more than his life—more even than her happiness. She only breathed one long sigh, which sounded like the last murmur of a despairing heart.

“And now listen to me, my dearest one,” said Harley Westford, in tones which he strove to render cheerful. “Listen to me, my own brave, true-hearted wife; for I must talk to you of serious business before the Winchester coach turns the sharp corner yonder by the village pond.”

He looked at his watch as he spoke.

“Only one more half-hour, Clara, and then

good-bye!" he exclaimed. "Now, darling, listen. You know that, thanks to Providence, I have been enabled to save a very decent little fortune for you and yours. Close against my breast I carry a pocket-book containing bank-notes to the amount of twenty thousand pounds, the entire bulk of my fortune, withdrawn from different foreign investments, by the advice of friends, who have given me warning of an approaching crisis in the money-market. There seems to be always something or other wrong in the money-market, by the way. Directly I return from China I shall invest this money, with the earnings of my present enterprise, in the best and safest manner I can. In the mean time, I shall place the money in the hands of the present head of the banking firm in which my father had the highest confidence; and in whose house he kept an account for thirty years of his life. In such hands the money will be safe until my return. And, to

guard against any chance of accident, I shall send you the banker's receipt for the twenty thousand pounds, and for the title-deeds of this house and land, which I shall also lodge in his hands. You will receive these from me before I set sail; and then, as my will is in the hands of my lawyer, you and the children will be safe, come what may."

"O, Harley," murmured Clara Westford, "every word you say makes me more and more wretched. You talk as if you were going to certain death."

"No, darling, I only talk like a prudent man, who knows the uncertainty of life. But I will say no more, Clara. With twenty thousand pounds, and the freehold of this old Grange, with fifty acres of the best land in Hampshire spreading round it, you and the dear ones cannot be ill provided for. And now, dearest, nearly half my time has gone, and I must go and say good-bye to my children."

The Captain stepped from the shady alley to the broad sunshine of the lawn. Opposite him were the windows of a pretty morning-room, sheltered by a long verandah, half hidden under honeysuckle and roses. The cages of the pet birds hung under this verandah, and a Skye terrier was lying on the silky white mat stretched before one of the long French windows, blinking his lazy eyelids in the meridian sun.

A girl of about seventeen appeared in this window. As the Captain stepped out upon the lawn she came running towards him.

Never, perhaps, had the June sunlight shone upon a lovelier creature than this white-robed girl who came to meet the Captain. Her beauty had a sunny freshness which seemed in harmony with the summer morning. Her features were small and delicately formed; the nose, forehead, and chin of the purest Grecian type. Her eyes, like her mother's, were of the deepest violet hue,

large, lustrous, and earnest, fringed by long auburn lashes. Her hair was of that golden tint so rare in nature, and which art has been wont to simulate, from the age of Roman Lydias and Julias down to our own enlightened era.

This was Violet Westford. They had called her Violet because of those deep-blue eyes, which were only to be matched by the hue of the modest hedgerow flower that hides its beauty under sheltering leaves. They had called her Violet; and well did the sweet romantic name harmonise with the nature of Clara Westford's daughter, for the girl was almost as unconscious of her exquisite loveliness as the timid blossom after which she had been christened.

"Dearest father," she exclaimed, passing her little hand through the Captain's arm, while Mrs. Westford sank faint and exhausted upon a garden-seat on the lawn, "mamma has been very cruel to detain you so long, while your poor Violet has

been longing for a chance of saying good-bye. I have been counting the minutes, papa, and the coach will be at the gate almost immediately. O, papa, papa, it seems so hard to lose you!"

The beautiful blue eyes filled with tears as the girl clung to her father; but in Violet Westford's face there was no trace of that awful shadow which blanched the cheeks and lips of her mother to a death-like whiteness. Violet only felt a natural grief at this parting with a father whom she idolised. There was no presentiment of impending peril weighing down her heart.

"Lionel has gone to get Warrior saddled," she said; "he is going to ride by the cross-road to Winchester. He will be there to meet you when the coach arrives, and will only part from you when the train leaves the station. How I envy him that half-hour at the station! Men are always better off than women," murmured the petted

beauty of seventeen, with the most bewitching *moue*.

“My darling, hark! There is the coach.”

The guard's horn playing a joyous polka made itself heard among the trees as the Captain spoke. At the same moment Lionel Westford rode out of an old-fashioned ivy-covered archway, which formed the entrance to the stables. The coach stopped at the low wide gate opening into the Grange gardens, and the guard's horn had an impatient sound in the ears of Violet Westford.

Mrs. Westford rose from the rustic bench, calm and tearless, but deadly pale. She advanced to her husband, and put her icy hands in his.

“My beloved,” she murmured, “my all in all, I can only pray for you. I must ask you one question, Harley. You spoke just now of a banker; tell me his name, dearest. I have a particular reason for making this inquiry.”

“ My father’s bankers were Godwin and Selby,” answered the Captain ; “ the present head of the firm is Rupert Godwin. My own darling, good-bye.”

The horn playing that cheerful dance-music sounded louder and more clamorous than ever, as Harley Westford pressed one kiss upon his wife’s white lips and tore himself away. So hurried, so agitated, had the Captain been in that sad parting, that he had been utterly unconscious of the one low agonised cry which broke from his wife’s lips at the sound of Rupert Godwin’s name.

But as the coach drove away, bearing with it the husband and father, Clara Westford tottered forward a few paces, and then fell back swooning on the grass.

Violet returned from the garden-gate to see her mother lying upon the ground, white and motionless as a corpse. The girl’s terror-stricken shriek brought a couple of women servants run-

ning from the house. Mrs. Westford was no puling sentimentalist; and deeply as she had always felt the pain of parting from the husband she so fondly loved, she had never before been known to lose consciousness. She had, indeed, been distinguished for the heroic calmness with which she had always endured her sorrow, setting a noble example to her son and daughter.

The servants, assisted by Violet, carried the unconscious wife into the house, and laid her on a sofa in the cool drawing-room, carefully darkened by the Venetian shutters.

One of the women then ran to fetch the village doctor, while Violet knelt by her mother's side, bathing the pale forehead with toilet vinegar.

Presently the dark-blue eyes were slowly opened and turned towards Violet with a fixed and almost awful stare.

“Rupert Godwin! Rupert Godwin!” cried Clara Westford in tones of anguish. “O, not to

him, Harley! O, no, no, no! Not to him! Rupert Godwin! I knew that there was peril, deadly peril, in store for you; but I never dreamt of that danger."

Again the eyes closed; the head fell back upon the sofa-pillows.

The doctor came; but neither he nor any other doctor upon this earth could have ministered to her, whose disease was of the mind rather than of the body.

Mrs. Westford fell from one fainting-fit into another. She was conveyed to her own room, where she was tenderly watched by her daughter, and by her son Lionel, who returned from Winchester after having seen his father start by the London train.

The young man adored his mother, and was both grieved and alarmed by her sudden illness. He insisted upon taking up his post in a pretty little boudoir adjoining Mrs. Westford's bedroom,

and he sat there hour after hour, listening to every sound in the sick chamber.

The old Grange, so gay with happy voices only a few days before, was now silent as the house of death. The doctor ordered his patient to be kept in unbroken quiet, and his orders were implicitly obeyed.

But though Mr. Sanderson, the village surgeon, was a man of considerable experience, he found his patient's illness of a nature to baffle his best care, his highest skill.

"The mind is ailing, Miss Westford," he said, in answer to Violet's anxious questions; "the parting of to-day has affected your mother very keenly, and hers is an illness that time alone can heal. In the mean while I can only recommend perfect repose. The mind has been over-excited by painful emotions, and we must allow time for recovery. A night's rest may restore the brain to its normal state. To-morrow all may be well."

CHAPTER II.

RUPERT GODWIN THE BANKER.

THE express-train from Winchester bore Harley Westford quickly across the fair expanse of country between the old cathedral city and the smoky roof-tops of the metropolis. Past swelling hillside and sunlit meadow, past winding river and secluded village, rushed the mighty monster. London, black, grimy, but with a certain rugged grandeur of its own, like some dusky Cyclops, mighty in his gigantic stature,—London, the commercial centre of the world,—loomed in sight of the merchant Captain, whose heart was divided between the dear ones he had left in the rustic Grange at Eastburgh, and the scenes of

adventure, and perhaps peril, that lay before him on the high seas.

Harley Westford was in heart and soul a sailor. He had the spirit of a Columbus, and would gladly have gone forth in search of new worlds wherewith to enrich his Queen and country, if fate had permitted him so noble an adventure. His heart warmed at the thought of his Chinese expedition—an expedition which promised to make a noble addition to his fortune. For himself, no man could have been more indifferent about money. He had the true sailor's recklessness of spirit, and would have flung his gold right and left, had he been alone in the world, as carelessly as the untutored salt, who, from sheer bravado, puts a bank-note between his bread-and-butter and eats it, in order to demonstrate his contempt for the sordid pelf. But for his children he was eager to earn the means of comfort and independence, so that no hard battle of life might

await those pampered children, that idolised wife, who as yet had known only the sunshine of existence.

He reached London at about half-past one o'clock, and drove straight to Lombard-street, in which noble commercial thoroughfare the banking-house of Messrs. Godwin and Selby was situated.

The name of Selby had long ceased to be anything more than a name. The last Selby had expired placidly in a comfortable mansion at Tulse Hill, some little time after the battle of Waterloo. The firm was now solely represented by Rupert Godwin, the only son of the late head of the firm, Anthony Godwin, and of a noble Spanish lady, who had given supreme offence to her family by marrying a wealthy British trader, rather than one of the penniless hidalgos who were eager to unite their unimpeachable pedigrees and quarter their knightly arms with hers.

The lady was proud, passionate, and self-willed. She preferred the British trader to the descendants of the Cid, and left the shadowy glories of her native land for the comfort and splendour of her husband's noble old mansion, where she ruled him with despotic power till the day of her death.

Two sons and three daughters were born to the proud Castilian beauty; but those children of the South languished under the cold English sky. The youngest son, Rupert, was the only one of the family who lived to attain manhood. He inherited his mother's Spanish beauty, together with her wilful and passionate nature.

This Rupert Godwin was a man of five-and-forty years of age, who had inherited a noble fortune from his father, and who had obtained another fortune with the hand of his wife, the only daughter of a city millionaire, an amiable but not over-wise damsel, who had worshipped

her husband as a kind of demigod, and who had faded quietly out of existence soon after the birth of her second child, not by any means passionately lamented by Rupert Godwin.

He was a man who had begun the world very early, and had exhausted the common round of life's pleasures and dissipations at an age when other men are still enjoying the freshness of youth's morning. He had been his own master from the age of sixteen, for the simple reason that neither his father nor his tutors had ever been able to conquer his indomitable spirit, or restrain his determined will.

His father had been much shaken by the early deaths of his children and the loss of his wife, who died when Rupert was fifteen. He allowed this last surviving son to do as he pleased, and dawdled through his lonely existence at his country house, in the company of his medical attendant and a valet who had grown gray in his service.

While the father's placid days glided by at the country seat in Hertfordshire, the son travelled from one place to another, sometimes abroad, sometimes at home, spending money lavishly, and seeing a great deal of life, more or less to his own satisfaction, but not very much to his moral improvement.

At three-and-twenty he married; but those who knew him best augured little happiness from this marriage. He accepted his wife's devotion as a matter of course, allowed her to live her own life at the noble old house in Hertfordshire, while he followed the bent of his inclinations elsewhere, honouring his household by his presence during all seasons of gaiety and festivity, but studiously avoiding the delights of domestic retirement. The business of the bank always afforded Mr. Godwin an excellent excuse for absence. There were branch-houses in Spain and in Spanish America, and these branch-houses were under the personal supervision of the banker.

For many years the name of Rupert Godwin had been in the minds of City men a tower of strength. But within the last few weeks there had come a crisis in the fortunes of great commercial firms, and all at once there were strange whispers passing from lip to lip amongst the wise men of the Stock Exchange. It was well known that for some years Rupert Godwin had been a great speculator. It was now whispered abroad that he had not been always a fortunate speculator. He had been bitten with the mania of speculation, men said, and had plunged wildly into all manner of schemes, many of which had ended in ruin.

Such whispers as these are fatal in their influence upon the credit of a commercial man. But as yet these dark rumours had not gone beyond the narrow circle of wiseacres ; as yet no hint of Rupert Godwin's losses had reached those whose money was lodged in his keeping ; as yet, therefore, there had been no run upon the bank.

The banker sat in his private room, with his books spread open before him, while with a white face and a heavily-beating heart he examined the state of his affairs. Daily, almost hourly, he expected a desperate crisis, and he tried in vain to devise some means of meeting it.

There was only one human being who was admitted to Rupert Godwin's confidence, and that was his head clerk, Jacob Danielson.

Ever since Rupert's earliest manhood this Danielson had been in his employment, and little by little there had grown up a strange bond of union between the two men.

It could not be called friendship, for the banker was of too reserved a nature to form a close friendship with any one—least of all with an inferior; and whatever the confidences between him and his clerk, he was always haughty and commanding in his tone and manner towards his dependent.

But Jacob Danielson was the depository of many of his employer's secrets, and seemed to possess an almost superhuman power of reading every thought that entered the brain of Rupert Godwin.

It may be that the banker knew this, and that there were times when he felt a kind of terror of his shabby, queer-looking dependent.

Nothing could be wider than the contrast between the outward appearance of the two men.

Rupert Godwin had one of those darkly splendid faces which we rarely see out of an old Italian picture—such a face as Leonardo or Guido might have chosen for a Herod or a Saul.

He was tall and broad-chested, his head nobly poised upon his shoulders. His dark flashing eyes had something of the falcon in their proud and eager glance; but beneath the calm steady gaze of more honest eyes those falcon glances grew shifting and restless.

Jacob Danielson was strangely deficient in those physical perfections which had so furthered his master's fortunes.

The clerk was a wizen little man, with high shoulders, and a queer, limping walk. His small but piercing gray eyes looked out from under the shelter of a protruding forehead, fringed by two shaggy eyebrows. His thin lips were apt to be disturbed by a twitching motion, which at times was almost painful to witness.

Jacob Danielson was one of those walking mysteries whose thoughts, deeds, and words are alike beyond the comprehension of other men. No one understood him; no one was able to fathom the secrets hidden in his breast.

He lived in a dingy little lodging on the Surrey side of the Thames, a lodging which he had occupied for years, and where he had never been known to receive the visit of any human being.

It was known that he drank deeply, but he had never been seen in a state of intoxication. There were those amongst his fellow-clerks who had tried to make him drunk, and who declared that there was no spirit potent enough to master the senses of Jacob Danielson.

To his employer he was a most indefatigable servant. He *seemed* also a faithful servant; yet there were times in which the banker trembled when he remembered the dangerous secrets lodged in the keeping of this unsympathetic, inscrutable being.

While Rupert Godwin sat in his private apartment meditating over the books of the house, and dreading the bursting of that storm-cloud which had so long brooded above his head, Harley Westford was hurrying towards him, eager to deposit in his hands the savings of twenty years of peril and hardship.

A hansom cab carried the Captain to the door

of the banking-house. He alighted, and made his way into the outer office of the firm, where he addressed himself to the first person whom he found disengaged. That person happened to be no other than Jacob Danielson, the chief clerk.

“I want to see Mr. Godwin,” said the Captain.

“Impossible,” Jacob answered coolly. “Mr. Godwin is particularly engaged. If you will be good enough to state your business, I shall be very happy to—”

“Thank you. No; I won't trouble you. My time is very precious just now; but as my business is important, I'll wait till Mr. Godwin is disengaged. When a man comes to place the savings of a lifetime with a banking firm in which he has confidence, he feels a sort of satisfaction in depositing his money in the hands of the principal.”

Jacob Danielson's thin lips twitched nervously.

The savings of a lifetime! A stranger eager to place his money in Rupert Godwin's hands at a time when the banker expected only the frantic demands of panic-stricken depositors, eager to snatch their treasures from a falling house!

Jacob looked with keen scrutinising eyes at the honest sailor, half suspecting that there might be some trap hidden beneath his apparent simplicity. But no one looking at Harley Westford could possibly suspect him of cunning or treachery.

"The poor fool has walked straight into the lion's den," thought the clerk; "and he'll be tolerably close-shaved before he walks out of it."

He sat at his desk for some minutes, scratching his head in a reflective manner, and looking furtively at handsome hazel-eyed Harley Westford, who was swinging his cane, and rocking himself backwards and forwards on his chair in a manner expressive of considerable impatience.

Presently the clerk dismounted from his high stool. "Come, I see you're in a hurry, sir," he said, "so I'll go into the parlour and ascertain what Mr. Godwin's engagements are. Shall I take your card?"

"Yes; you may as well do so. My father was a customer of the firm, and Mr. Godwin may have heard my name before to-day."

He *may* have heard your name, Harley Westford! That name is written in letters of fire on the heart of Rupert Godwin, never to be erased on this side of the grave.

Jacob Danielson carried the card into the banker's sitting-room, and threw it on the table before his master, without once deigning to look at the name inscribed upon it.

"Some unfortunate fool has come to deposit a lump of money in your hands, sir," he said coolly;

“he’s very particular about placing it in *your* hands, so that he may be sure it’s safe. I suppose you’ll see him?”

“Yes,” answered the banker haughtily; “you can show him in.”

The cool insolence of his clerk’s manner galled him cruelly. He had borne the same insolence without wincing in the hour of his prosperity; but now that he felt himself upon the verge of ruin Jacob Danielson’s familiarity stung him to the quick. A deposed sovereign is quick to feel insolence from his lackeys.

It was only when the clerk had left the room that Rupert Godwin looked at the card lying on the table before him.

His glance was careless at first; but in the very moment when he recognised the name inscribed upon the slip of pasteboard his face changed as few faces have power to change.

The sallow skin darkened to a dull leaden tint;

a kind of electric flame seemed to kindle in the dark eyes.

“Harley Westford!” he muttered. “And it is to me, his bitterest enemy, that he brings his wealth; and at such a time as this! There is a Nemesis who plans these things.”

The banker crushed the card in his sinewy hand, and after that one passionate gesture controlled his emotion by a strength of will which was like iron in its unyielding nature. His face, so suddenly distorted, became as suddenly calm and placid, and he looked up with a friendly smile as Harley entered the room.

No warning presentiment restrained the sailor at this last moment. He handed the pocket-book to the banker, and said quietly, “That, Mr. Godwin, contains the hard-won earnings of twenty years. Be so good as to count the notes. You’ll find a thousand for every year—not so bad, take it all in all. I had the money invested in foreign

loans, and it brought me very handsome interest, I can assure you. But some wise friends of mine have taken fright. There's to be war here, and war there—two or three thrones expected to topple over during the next six months, and three or four glorious republics on the point of intestine war. 'Sell out,' say my friends. 'What! and give up ten per cent?' say I. And then they remind me of the cautious old Duke's axiom: 'The better your interest, the worse your security.' So I 'cave in' at once, as the Yankees say; and here I am, safe out of the lion's claws, and ready to accept the current rate of interest for my capital."

"I congratulate you on your escape," answered the banker. "There's more than one storm brewing on the Continent, and foreign stock is dropping every day."

"Well, I'm glad I've done right. You see, I'm going to risk my life upon one more journey before I settle down in the pleasant harbour of

home. I don't know anything about this house myself, but I know my father trusted your father to his dying day. I shall feel quite comfortable when my money is safely lodged in your hands. You find the amount correct, I suppose?"

Rupert Godwin was counting the little packet of notes which he held in his hand as the Captain spoke. Harley Westford did not see that the banker's hand trembled slightly as it grasped the fluttering pieces of tissue paper.

Twenty thousand pounds! Such a sum trusted in his keeping at such a moment might be the salvation of his credit.

"I have one charge more to confide in your hands," said the Captain, "and then I can leave England in peace. This sealed packet contains the title-deeds of a small estate in Hampshire, on which my wife and children reside; with your permission I will lodge the packet in your hands."

As he spoke, Harley Westford laid a sealed packet on the table.

“I shall be happy to accept any charge you may confide in me,” the banker answered with a courteous smile.

“And you’ll allow me decent interest on my money?”

“On deposits placed with us for a year certain we allow five per cent.”

“I think that settles everything,” said the sailor; “and now I can face danger, or death, without fear. Come what may, my wife and children are provided for. Let my fate be what it will, they are beyond the power of evil fortune.”

Rupert Godwin, bending over the papers before him, smiled to himself as Harley Westford uttered these words—a strange, almost satanic smile.

“Stay!” exclaimed the Captain, “you ought to give me some kind of receipt for that money, and those deeds, ought you not? I don’t pre-

tend to be a man of business ; but you see in these affairs a family man is bound to be precise—even if he happens to be a sailor.”

“Most decidedly ; I was waiting the opportunity of giving you your receipt,” replied the banker coolly.

He touched a little hand-bell on the table before him, and the next minute Jacob Danielson appeared in answer to the summons.

“Bring me some blank forms of receipt, Danielson.”

The clerk obeyed ; and Rupert Godwin filled-in the receipt for twenty thousand pounds.

To this he affixed his own signature, and then handed the paper to Jacob Danielson, who signed his name below that of his master, as witness. The banker also filled-in and duly signed an acknowledgment of the sealed packet containing the title-deeds of the Grange.

With these two documents in the breast-pocket

of his light outer-coat, Harley Westford departed, delighted with the idea that he had rendered the fortunes of his wife and children thoroughly secure.

The same hansom cab that had driven him from the railway station to the bank in Lombard-street drove him to the Docks, where he alighted, and made his way on board his own vessel, the Lily Queen.

Her freight had been taken on board some days before, and all was ready for departure. A bright-faced, good-looking man of about five and twenty was pacing up and down the deck as the Captain came alongside the vessel.

This young man was Gilbert Thornleigh, first mate of the Lily Queen, and a great favourite of Harley Westford's. He had been down to the Grange with his Captain, and had fallen desperately in love with Violet in the course of a three-days' visit to that rustic paradise; but it is need-

less to say that the sailor kept the secret of his inflammable heart. The Captain's beautiful daughter seemed as high above him as some duchess crowned with a diadem and robed in ermine might appear to some young captain of household troops.

Captain Westford greeted Gilbert with a hearty grasp of the hand.

"True to my time, you see, my lad," he said.

"Yes, Captain; always true."

"And this time I can leave England with a light heart," said Harley; "for I have made all secure for my wife and children. No more foreign loans and Otaheite railway debentures and Fiji Island first-preference bonds, my lad, which bewilder a plain man's brains when he tries to understand them. I have placed the whole lump of money in the hands of an old-established English banker, and in my pocket here I have Rupert Godwin's receipt for the cash."

Gilbert Thornleigh stared aghast at his Captain.

“Rupert Godwin!” he exclaimed. “You can’t mean that, Captain? You can’t mean that you have placed your money with the firm of Godwin and Selby?”

“Why not, lad? Why shouldn’t I place it with them?”

“Because it is whispered that they are on the verge of ruin. I had a few hundreds in their hands myself until yesterday; but my uncle, an old City man, gave me a word of warning, and I drew every farthing of my money before the bank closed last night. But don’t be uneasy, Captain, the rumour may be a false one. Besides, it’s not too late; you can withdraw your money.”

Harley Westford’s face grew suddenly white. He reeled like a drunken man, and clung to the bulwark for support.

“The villain!” he exclaimed; “the infernal scoundrel! He knew that the money belonged to my wife and children, and he smiled in my face while he took it from me!”

“But there is time enough yet, Captain,” said Gilbert Thornleigh, looking at his watch; “the bank will not close before four o’clock, and it’s now only three. You can go ashore and get your money back.”

“Yes,” cried Harley Westford, with a terrible oath, “I will have my money—or the life of that villain! My children! My wife! The scoundrel could look me in the face and know that he was robbing two helpless women! No, no, my darlings, you shall not be cheated!”

“Captain, there is not a moment to lose.”

“I know, lad; I know,” answered Harley, passing his hand across his brow as if to collect his scattered senses. “This news upset me a bit at first, but I shall be all right presently. See

here, my lad; you know how I have always trusted you, and now I must place a still greater trust in your hands. Come what may, the Lily Queen sails at daybreak to-morrow. If I am on board her by that time, well and good. If not, she must sail without me, and you, Gilbert Thornleigh, go as her captain. Remember that. I will have no delays; the men are all on board her, her cargo is expected and waited for out yonder. There has been too much delay as it is, and it's a point of honour with me not to lose another hour. I trust you, Gilbert, as if you were my son. Heaven only knows when I may see blue water again. If this man Rupert Godwin is indeed on the verge of ruin, he will scarcely relinquish twenty thousand pounds without a struggle. But, come what may, I will have the money from him, by fair means or foul. In the mean time, Gilbert, I trust the command of the vessel to you in case of the worst. Remember, she sails to-morrow morning."

“Without fail, Captain, and you with her, please Providence!”

“That,” answered Harley Westford solemnly, “is in the hands of Heaven.”

He placed all the necessary papers in the young man's custody, and after a few instructions, hurriedly but not carelessly given, he wrung Gilbert's extended hand, and then sprang into the boat which was to take him ashore.

He called the first cab that was to be found outside the Docks, and told the man to drive at a gallop to Lombard-street.

The bank was closing as the Captain alighted from the vehicle. Mr. Godwin had just left for his country-house, the clerk told Harley, and no further business could be transacted that day.

“Then I must follow him to his country-house,” answered the Captain. “Where is it?”

“Wilmington Hall, on the North road, beyond Hertford.”

“How can I get there?”

“You can go by rail to Hertford, and then get a fly across to the Hall. It’s only a mile and a half from the station.”

“Good,” answered Harley Westford. Then, after directing the cabman to drive his fastest to the Great Northern Terminus, he stepped once more into the vehicle.

“Neither Rupert Godwin nor I shall know peace or rest until that money has been restored to its rightful owner!” cried the Captain, raising his clenched hand, as if he would have invoked the powers of Heaven to witness his oath.

He little knew how terribly that oath was to be fulfilled.

CHAPTER III.

AN IMPORTUNATE CREDITOR.

WHILE Harley Westford was making his way to Hertford by express-train, Mr. Godwin sat over his wine in one of the splendid apartments of Wilmington Hall.

Wilmington Hall was no modern villa erected by a wealthy speculator, one of the merchant princes of the commercial age. It was a noble relic of the past; one of those stately habitations which we find here and there embosomed in woods whose growth is of a thousand years. For centuries the Hall had been the residence of a grand old race; but reckless extravagance had driven the lords of the mansion away from its ponderous gates, to give place to the rich

commoner, whose wealth made him master of the old domain.

The Hall was built in the form of a quadrangle, and was large enough to have accommodated a regiment of soldiers. One side of the quadrangle had been built in the early Tudor period, and had been disused for many years. The stone mullions of the windows darkened the rooms, and the tapestry hung rotting on the walls of the gloomy bedchambers and the low-roofed saloons of a bygone age.

There were few of the banker's household who would have been bold enough to enter this northern wing of the mansion, which was, of course, reported to be haunted; but Mr. Godwin himself had been often known to visit the silent chambers, where the dust lay thick upon the mouldering oaken floors. The banker had indeed caused an iron safe to be placed in one of the lower rooms; and it was said that he kept

a great deal of old-fashioned plate and jewelry, intrusted to him by his customers, in the cellarage below this northern wing.

— Very few persons living in this present day had ever descended to these cellars; but it was reported that they extended the whole length and breadth of the northern side of the quadrangle, and even penetrated into the adjoining wings. It was also said that in the time of the civil wars these cellars had been used as prisons for the enemy, and as hiding-places for the faithful adherents of the good cause.

The servants of Mr. Godwin's numerous household often talked of those gloomy underground chambers, but not one among them would have been courageous enough to descend into the dark and unknown vaults. Nor were the cellars ever left open to any hazardous intruder, as the ponderous old keys belonging to them, and to all the rooms in the deserted

northern wing, were lodged in the safe keeping of Mr. Godwin himself, and no doubt stowed away in one of the numerous iron safes which lined the walls of his study. There was some legend of a subterranean passage leading from some part of the grounds to the cellarage; but no one now in the household had ever ventured to test the truth of this legend. Was there not also the legend of a White Lady, whose shadowy form might be met at any hour in those darksome chambers,—a harmless lady enough while in the flesh, a poor gentle creature, who had broken her heart and gone distraught for love of an inconstant gentleman in the military line; but a very troublesome lady in the spirit, since she appeared to devote her leisure to sighing and wailing in passages and cupboards, and to the performance of every variety of scratching, and knocking, and scraping, and tapping known to the most ingenious of ghosts.

In the neighbourhood of Wilmington Hall Mr. Godwin was looked upon as the possessor of almost fabulous wealth. He was regarded as a kind of modern magician, who could have coined gold out of the dead leaves which strewed Wilmington woods in the autumn, if he had chosen to do so.

The June evening was as beautiful as the June morning had been. The western sky was one grand blaze of crimson and orange, as Rupert Godwin sat over his wine in his spacious oak-panelled dining-room. He was not alone. On the opposite side of the table appeared the wizen face of the clerk, Jacob Danielson.

Crystal decanters, diamond cut, and sparkling as if studded with jewels, glittered in the crimson sunset, and fragrant hothouse fruits were piled amongst their dewy leaves in dishes of rare old Sèvres china. Luxury and elegance surrounded the banker on every side; but he had by no

means the air of a man who enjoys the delights of the Sybarite's *dolce far niente*. A dark frown of discontent obscured his handsome face, and the violet-perfumed Burgundy, which his clerk was sniffing with the true epicurean gusto, had no charm for the master.

Rupert Godwin had felt himself compelled to conciliate his clerk. Did not Jacob know of the twenty thousand pounds—that twenty thousand pounds respecting which dark plots were now being woven in the banker's mind?

That sum might have restored Mr. Godwin's shaken credit for a time; but what would he be able to do when the Captain returned from his Chinese voyage, and demanded the restoration of his money?

Rupert Godwin hated Harley Westford with a deeply-rooted hatred, though he had never looked upon the sailor's face until that day. The hatred which had long smouldered in the

banker's breast arose out of a dark mystery of the past—a mystery in which Clara, the Captain's wife, had been concerned.

Under these circumstances, Rupert Godwin, ever selfish, false, and unscrupulous, resolved on appropriating the sailor's fortune. Ruin stared him in the face. He had speculated wildly, and had lost heavily. He resolved on leaving Europe for ever, and carrying with him the twenty thousand pounds intrusted to him by Harley Westford.

He had spent some of the pleasantest years of his youth in South America, where a member of his family occupied a position of some importance as a merchant.

“Under a feigned name, and in that distant land, no one will be able to discover the whereabouts of Rupert Godwin, the runaway banker,” he thought; “and with twenty thousand pounds for my starting-point, I may make a second for-

tune, larger than my first. Julia shall accompany me. My son may remain in England and shift for himself; there has never been much love between us, and I do not want to be hindered at every turn by some Quixotic scruple of his. Chivalry and commerce won't go in harness together. Bayard would have made a bad thing of it on the Stock Exchange."

Thus ran the banker's thoughts as he sat brooding over his wine; but every now and then his restless eyes glanced furtively towards the face of his clerk.

He feared Jacob Danielson. The fear as yet was shadowy and unreasoning; but he felt that the clerk knew too many of his secrets, and might become a hindrance to his schemes. He felt this, and in the mean time he was anxious to conciliate, and if possible hoodwink, Jacob Danielson.

"Yes, Jacob," he said presently, taking up

the thread of a former conversation, "this twenty thousand may enable us to weather the storm. If the first calls made upon us are promptly paid, confidence must be restored, and the rumour against us will die away."

"Very likely," answered the clerk, in that cool dry tone of voice which was peculiarly unpleasant to Rupert Godwin; "but when the sea captain comes home and wants his money—what then?"

"By that time we may be again in a strong position."

"Yes, we *may*! But how?"

"Some of the speculations in which my money has been risked may improve. My eggs are not all in one basket. Some of the baskets may prove to be sounder than they appear just now," answered the banker, who tried in vain to appear at his ease under the piercing scrutiny of Jacob's sharp gray eyes.

“Do you believe that, Mr. Godwin?” asked the clerk, in a tone that was strangely significant.

“Most decidedly.”

“Humph!” responded Jacob, rubbing the iron-gray stubble upon his chin with his horny palm, until the harsh rasping noise produced by that action set his employer’s teeth on edge. “I am glad you have so much confidence in the future.”

Rupert Godwin winced as he felt the sting contained in these simple words. He felt that to throw dust in the eyes of Mr. Danielson was by no means an easy operation. But he was no coward. He was a bold bad man, whose heart was not likely to fail him in any desperate venture.

“Bah!” he thought, as his strongly-marked brows contracted over his dark eyes, “what have I to fear from this man? True, that he knows

of the twenty thousand pounds; but what harm can his knowledge do me when I am far away from England and my creditors? In that money lies the means of new wealth."

His head drooped forward upon his breast, as he abandoned himself to a reverie that was not altogether unpleasant, when suddenly a voice, solemnly impressive in its tone, sounded in the quiet of the June twilight.

"Mr. Godwin," said the voice, "I come to demand from you the twenty thousand pounds which I lodged in your keeping to-day."

A thunderbolt descending from heaven to shatter the roof above him could scarcely have affected the banker more terribly than did the sound of that unceremonious demand.

He looked up, and saw Harley Westford standing in one of the long French windows which opened upon the lawn. The Captain stood on the threshold of the central window, exactly

opposite Rupert Godwin; and in the dim declining light the banker could see that Harley Westford's face was deadly pale. It was the fixed and resolute countenance of a desperate man.

For the first few moments after those words had been spoken Rupert Godwin was completely unnerved; but, with an effort, he shook off that feeling of mental paralysis which had taken possession of him, and assumed his usual ease of manner.

“My dear Captain Westford,” he said, “your sudden appearance actually alarmed me; and yet I am not generally subject to any nervous fancies. But this place is supposed to be haunted; and I give you my word you looked exactly like a ghost just now in the June gloaming. Pray be seated, and try some of that Chambertin, which I can recommend.—Danielson, will you be good enough to ring for lamps? The darkness has crept upon us unawares.”

“Yes,” answered the clerk, “we have been so deeply interested in our own thoughts.”

There was something like a sneer in Jacob Danielson’s tone as he said this ; and the banker felt as if his inmost thoughts had been read by his clerk.

“Well, Captain Westford,” said Mr. Godwin in his most careless tone, “to what do I owe the pleasure of this visit? You wish to make some new arrangement about the investment of your money ; perhaps you are not satisfied with the rate of interest allowed by our house. You want to dabble in some speculative investment.”

“Mr. Godwin,” exclaimed the sailor, “I am a plain-spoken man, and I don’t know how to beat about the bush. In a very few words, then, I want my money back.”

“You are afraid to trust it in my hands?”

“I am.”

“You have heard some false rumour, no doubt; some story got up by notorious City scoundrels. Some anonymous circular has reached you, perhaps, intended to undermine the credit of one of the best considered banking-firms in the City of London. I have heard of such stabs in the dark; and if I had my will the anonymous slanderer who destroys his neighbour’s credit should be hung as high as the assassin who takes his neighbour’s life.”

“The rumour which I have heard may be true or false,” replied the Captain quietly. “I trust, for your sake, Mr. Godwin, that it is false. I think it very likely that it may be so. But I am dealing with that which is dearer to me than my own heart’s blood. I am dealing with the money which represents the future comfort and safety of my wife and children. There must be no risk, not the shadow of risk, about that money. Ask me to trust you with my life, and I will

trust you freely ; but I will not leave that money in your hands. At the risk of giving you mortal offence I come to demand its restoration."

"And you shall have it in due course, my dear Captain Westford," answered the banker, throwing himself back in his chair and laughing aloud. "Pray, excuse me, but I cannot help being amused by your simplicity. You sailors are as bold as lions on the high seas, but the veriest cowards when you come into the neighbourhood of the Stock Exchange. I really can't help laughing at your fears."

"Laugh as much as you please, Mr. Godwin ; only, give me back my money."

"Most decidedly, my dear Captain Westford ; but as I don't happen to carry your fortune about with me in my waistcoat-pocket, you must wait till business hours to-morrow."

The sailor's countenance darkened.

"I relied on catching you in Lombard-street

before the bank closed," he said, "and I have given orders for the sailing of my vessel to-morrow at day-break. If I am not aboard her, she sails without me."

The banker was silent for some moments. The lamps had not yet been brought into the room, and in the darkness a sinister smile passed over Rupert Godwin's face.

"Your vessel sails without you," he said presently; "but of course your officers will await fresh orders from you?"

"No, they have no occasion to wait," answered the Captain; "they have received all necessary instructions. If I am not on board my vessel before daybreak to-morrow, my first mate will assume the post of captain, and the Lily Queen will leave the Pool without me."

Two men-servants entered the room with lamps at this moment. In the brilliant yet subdued light of the moderator-lamps, Rupert

Godwin looked like a man who was on good terms with himself and all the world. And yet Heaven alone knew the intensity of the struggle going forward in this man's mind.

“My dear Danielson,” he exclaimed, after glancing at the clock upon the chimney-piece—“my dear Danielson, have you any notion of the time? It is now past nine, and unless you start at once, you'll scarcely catch the 10.30 train from Hertford.”

“It is like you, to be so kind and thoughtful, Mr. Godwin!” the clerk said, looking searchingly at his employer. “Yes, my time is up, and I must be thinking of getting off.”

“I'll order one of my grooms to drive you to the station,” said Mr. Godwin; and before Jacob could remonstrate, he rang the bell and gave his directions to the servant who answered it.

Meanwhile Harley Westford stood a little way

from the table, pale and silent, and with a resolute look upon his frank handsome face.

During all this time he had not once seated himself; during all this time he had not once removed his gaze from the countenance of the banker. He wanted to discover whether or not Rupert Godwin was an honest man.

“I am waiting to hear your decision about that money, Mr. Godwin,” he said quietly; “remember, that to me it is a matter of life and death.”

“If you will step into my study, I shall be at your service immediately, Captain Westford,” answered the banker; “I have only a few words to say to my clerk, and then I will join you.”

A servant entered at this moment to announce that the dog-cart was ready to take Mr. Danielson to the station.

“Show this gentleman into my study,” said

Rupert Godwin, "and take lights there immediately."

Harley Westford followed the servant. When he entered the dining-room he had carried his light overcoat upon his arm: this coat he now left hanging loosely upon a chair.

"Now, my dear Jacob," said the banker, with every appearance of unconcern, "let me see you off, and then I will go and settle with this importunate sea-captain."

"But how will you settle with him?" asked Danielson in a low suppressed voice.

"Very easily. I will persuade him that the rumour he has heard against our credit is entirely false, and shall by that means prevail upon him to leave his money in my hands until his return from China."

"But he seems determined upon having the money back immediately. I fancy you'll find him rather a tough customer."

“Trust my diplomacy against his determination. Come, Jacob, you will certainly lose your train.”

The banker almost pushed his clerk towards the dog-cart which was waiting before the gothic porch of Wilmington Hall. Jacob mounted the vehicle, and the groom drove off at a smart pace.

Then, for the first time, Rupert Godwin sighed heavily, as he stood alone in the porch, and a dark cloud fell over his face.

“It is difficult work,” he muttered to himself; “awful work, let me plan it which way I will. But let me remember Clara Ponsonby—my love, and her disdain. Let me remember the past, and *that* memory may give me nerve and resolution to-night.”

He stood for some minutes in the porch, looking out into the summer darkness. No star had yet risen in the June heavens, and the lawn and gardens of Wilmington Hall were as dark as the

deepest recesses of the forest. After those few minutes of silent thought, the banker breathed one more sigh, profound as the first, and turned to reënter the house.

CHAPTER IV.

A NEW WAY TO PAY OLD DEBTS.

RUPERT GODWIN went at once to the library, where Harley Westford was waiting for him.

“Come, my dear Captain,” he said, as he entered the spacious room, the walls of which were lined with books, whose costly and artistic bindings announced alike the wealth of a millionaire and the perfect taste of an accomplished bibliophile, —“come, Captain, let us understand each other fully. You want this money to-night?”

“I do. My demand may perhaps be unreasonable, as this house is not your place of business, nor this an hour in which you are accustomed to transact business; but the peculiar circumstances of the case must plead my excuse.

I tell you again, Mr. Godwin, to me this is a matter of life or death."

"And if I refuse to give you the money to-night you will apply for it to-morrow, as soon as the bank opens?"

"Unquestionably."

"And if then there was any delay in the production of your money, what would you do?"

"I would dog your footsteps day and night; I would haunt you like your own shadow; I would stand upon the steps of your banking-house in Lombard-street and proclaim you as a thief and a scoundrel, until that twenty thousand pounds was produced. *My money!*" cried the Captain in passionate accents; "it is not my money; it is my wife's money, my children's money; and you had better try to take my life than to rob me of that."

"Come, come, my dear sir," said the banker, with his blandest smile, "pray do not excite your-

self. I was only putting a case. I daresay if I were a dishonest man you would be what is vulgarly called an ugly customer; but as I have no intention of withholding your money for an hour longer than is necessary, we need not discuss the matter with any violence. I told you just now that I was not in the habit of carrying twenty thousand pounds about me. Under ordinary circumstances, therefore, I should not be able to give you your money to-night. You say your vessel sails at daybreak to-morrow?"

"She does."

"And you will be a loser if you cannot sail with her?"

"A very considerable loser."

"Very well, then, Captain Westford," answered the banker, "you have not behaved very generously to me. You have intruded yourself upon my domestic privacy, and have insulted me by most unjust suspicions. In spite of this, how-

ever, I am prepared to act generously towards you. As the circumstances of the case are exceptional, I will strain a point in your favour. It happens, strange to say, that I have in this house a sum of money amounting to more than the twenty thousand pounds which you lodged in my hands."

"Indeed!"

"Yes. It is a strange coincidence, is it not?"

The banker laughed as he made this remark. Had Harley Westford been a suspicious man, skilled in reading the darker secrets of the human heart, something strained and unnatural in that laugh might have struck upon his ear, awakening a vague terror. But he suspected nothing. He was quite ready to believe that he had wronged Rupert Godwin by his impetuous demand for the return of his money.

"I happen to have an eccentric old lady amongst my customers, whose fortune of some

seven-and-twenty thousand pounds was, until a few days since, lodged in the hands of different railway companies," said the banker in his most business-like tone. "But a week or so ago she wrote to me in a panic, caused by some silly report she had heard, desiring me to sell out of these companies, and to keep her money in my hands until she gave me further directions respecting the disposal of it. But the best part of the business is, that she begged me to keep the money at my country-house, for fear, as she said, of a robbery in Lombard-street. Did you ever hear of anything so absurd?"

Again Mr. Godwin laughed, the same forced unnatural laugh as before.

"However, Captain Westford," he continued, "the old proverb very truly tells us, 'It is an ill wind that blows nobody good.' You shall profit by the old lady's eccentricity. If you will come with me to the other side of my house, where I

keep all valuables intrusted to me, I will give you Bank of England notes to the amount of twenty thousand pounds."

"I thank you very much," answered the Captain.

"No thanks, I am glad to do as much for the sake of——your wife."

The banker made a long pause before uttering those two last words.

He opened an iron safe, artfully disguised by doors of carved oak, and took from it a heavy bunch of keys, all labelled with slips of parchment. These keys belonged to the northern wing of the Hall.

As the two men were about to leave the room, the door was opened, and a woman appeared upon the threshold.

Never had Harley Westford looked upon beauty more splendid than that which now greeted his sight.

A girl of some nineteen years of age, whose

darkly-flashing eyes and Spanish style of beauty proclaimed her the daughter of Rupert Godwin, stood before him. But all that was stern and cold in the banker's face was softened into beauty in that of his daughter.

The eyes were oriental in their dark lustre, and there was a dewy softness mingled even with the eager brightness of their gaze. A crimson glow relieved the pale olive of the clear skin; and half-parted lips, whose vermilion recalled the hue of the pomegranate, displayed two rows of small white teeth that glittered in the lamp-light.

The girl's figure was tall and commanding, but she was graceful as an Andalusian countess.

Such was Julia Godwin, the only daughter of the banker and of the poor neglected lady who had been his wife.

I have been looking for you everywhere, papa!" exclaimed Julia; "where have you been hiding yourself all the evening?"

The banker turned upon his daughter with a frown.

“Have I to tell you again, Julia, that this is a room which I devote to business, and that I will not be intruded upon here?” he exclaimed sternly. “This gentleman is with me on an affair of vital importance, and I must beg that you will retire to your own apartments, and leave us undisturbed.”

“O, very well, papa,” said Julia, pouting her rosy under-lip in evident vexation, and lingering on the threshold with the privileged pertinacity of a spoiled child; “but it is dreadfully weary work sitting alone a whole evening in this melancholy old house, where one expects to see a ghost walk out of the panelling at any moment after dark. Mrs. Melville has gone to town to dine with some old friends, and will not come back till to-morrow morning; so I am all alone. And I looked forward to such a pleasant

evening with you. However, I'm going, papa; only I do think you're very unkind, and I—"

The dark frown upon Mr. Godwin's face silenced his daughter's complaining voice, and she retired, murmuring to herself about her father's unkindness.

Even the sternest men are liable to some weaknesses; and it must be confessed that Julia Godwin was a spoiled child, the favourite companion of a doting father.

Between Rupert Godwin and his son there was neither affection nor companionship. A strange and unnatural dislike divided the father and his only son; and it was in his daughter that the proud man had centred all his hopes.

"Come, Captain Westford," said the banker, when Julia had vanished, "it is growing late. The last train from Hertford leaves at a little before midnight. Will you be able to walk as far as the station?"

“Three times that distance, if necessary,” answered the seaman heartily.

“Come, then.”

Rupert Godwin took the lamp in one hand and the bunch of keys in the other. He went into the hall, followed by Captain Westford.

“There will be no vehicle required for this gentleman,” the banker said, to a servant whom they met in the hall; “he will take a short cut across the park, and walk back to Hertford.”

Rupert Godwin led the way along corridors carpeted with velvet pile, and adorned with pictures and statues, and great china vases of exotic flowers, whose rich perfumes filled the air. All was luxury and elegance in this part of the house, and through the open doors Harley Westford caught glimpses of exquisitely-furnished apartments, in which the carved oaken wainscots and richly-adorned ceilings of the Elizabethan age

A NEW WAY TO PAY OLD DEBTS.

contrasted with the most graceful achievements of modern upholstery.

But suddenly the scene changed. At the end of a long corridor the banker unlocked a ponderous oaken door, and led the way into a dark passage, where the atmosphere seemed thick with dust, and where there was a faint musty smell that seemed the very odour of decay.

They were now in the northern wing of Wilmingdon Hall, amongst those disused chambers to whose dull solitude it pleased the banker sometimes to betake himself.

Harley Westford looked round him with a shudder.

“We seamen are rather superstitious fellows,” he said; “the air of this place chills me to the bone, and I should expect to meet a ghost in these dark passages. The place feels like a grave.”

“Does it?” exclaimed the banker; “that’s strange !”

Again, if Harley Westford had been a suspicious man, he might have detected something sinister in the tone in which those words were spoken.

The banker unlocked a door leading into a small low-roofed chamber, which bore the aspect of being sometimes occupied by a business man.

There were iron safes along one side of the room, and a desk and a couple of chairs stood in the centre of the bare oak floor. There was a long narrow window, guarded by iron bars and by heavy shutters on the outside. At one end of the room there was a door, also heavily barred with iron.

Nothing could be more dreary than the aspect of this apartment, dimly illuminated by the lamp which Rupert Godwin placed upon the desk.

“It is in this room that I keep any objects of special value intrusted to me for any length of time,” he said, as Harley Westford’s eyes

wandered slowly round the apartment. "Those safes contain money and securities. That door leads to a cellar in which I keep plate."

He opened one of the safes and took out an iron box.

"This is Miss Wentworth's fortune," he said, "twenty thousand pounds of which I am about to deliver to you."

He set the box upon the desk; and while the Captain was looking at it with an almost respectful gaze, as the casket which contained so much wealth, Rupert Godwin turned once more to the safe.

This time Harley Westford did not see the object which he took from that iron repository.

It was something that flashed with a blue glitter in the light of the lamp—something which the banker concealed in the sleeve of his coat as he turned towards the sailor.

"Come," he said; with his most careless

manner, "you must see my mysterious cellar before you leave this old haunted wing of the Hall. You are not afraid of the ghosts, I suppose, in my company?"

"Neither in yours nor alone," answered Harley; "a sailor is never afraid. He may believe in the appearance of strange visitants upon this earth, but he does not fear them."

The banker unlocked the iron-barred door, and pulled it open. It revolved very slowly on its ponderous hinges, revealing a flight of steep steps that led downwards into impenetrable darkness.

"So that is where you keep your treasures!" cried the sailor; "a regular Aladdin's cave!"

"Yes," answered Rupert Godwin; "if you are an amateur of old silver, you would find plenty to interest you in that vault—candelabras that have lighted the banquets of the Tudors, tankards that Cromwell's thick lips have touched, tea-pots and salvers made by Queen Anne's

favourite silversmith, the tarnished treasures of some of the best families in England. Take the lamp and look down."

Harley took the lamp from the table, and approached the threshold of the door.

He stood for some few moments looking thoughtfully down into the gloomy vault below.

"A queer place!" he said; "darker than the hold of a slave-ship off the African coast."

As he uttered the last few words, the arm of the banker was suddenly raised, and that mysterious something which flashed with a blue glitter in the lamplight descended upon the sailor's back.

Harley Westford uttered one groan, staggered forward, and fell headlong down the steep flight of steps leading to the cellar.

There was a crash of broken glass as the lamp fell from his hand; then a dull heavy thud, which was reëchoed with a hollow sound in the vault

below—a sound that prolonged itself like the suppressed roar of distant thunder.

The banker thrust his hand into his breast, then pushed the heavy door upon its hinges, and turned the key in the lock.

“I do not think he will come to Lombard-street to demand his money, or stand upon the steps of my house to denounce me for a thief and a scoundrel,” muttered Rupert Godwin, as he dropped the bunch of keys into his coat-pocket.

Then he groped his way from the room, and crept cautiously along the narrow passage leading to the occupied portion of the house.

He had left the door of communication ajar, and he saw the light shining through the aperture.

He seemed to breathe more freely as he emerged into the carpeted corridor, and locked the door behind him.

As he was turning the key in the lock, Julia

Godwin came out of one of the rooms near at hand.

“Where is your friend, papa?” she asked, with a look of surprise.

“He has gone back to London.”

“But how did he go? I saw you both go into the northern wing just now, and I have been sitting in my own room with the door open listening for your footsteps ever since. I am sure he has not passed along this passage.”

For a moment the banker was silent.

“How inquisitive you are, Julia!” he said at last. “I let that gentleman out of the side-door in the northern wing, as he wanted to get across the park by the shortest way.”

“Ah, to be sure. But what could take you into that horrible northern wing?”

“Business. I have important papers there. Go back to your room, Julia; I cannot stay to be questioned.”

The girl looked at her father with an expression of mingled wonder and anxiety.

“Papa!” she exclaimed, “you are as pale as death. I never saw you look like this before. And it is not like you to be so cross to me. I am sure that something has happened to vex you; something very serious.”

“I had rather unpleasant business with that man; but it is all over now, and he has gone. Let me pass, Julia; I have important letters to write before I go to bed.”

“Good-night then, papa,” said Julia, holding up her face to be kissed. But before the kiss could be given, she recoiled from her father, with a sudden movement, and a low cry of terror.

“See there!” she exclaimed, pointing to his breast.

“What is the matter, child?”

“Blood, papa! A spot of blood upon your shirt.”

The banker looked down, and saw a little splash of blood upon the spotless whiteness of his cambric shirt-front. "How silly you are, Julia!" he said. "My nose bled a little just now, as I was stooping over some papers. My brain is overloaded with blood, I think. There, there—good-night, child."

He pressed his lips upon the girl's uplifted brow. Those cold bloodless lips sent a chill through her veins.

"What is the matter with papa, to-night?" she thought, as she returned to her own apartment; "I'm afraid something must have gone wrong in the City."

The banker walked slowly to the dining-room, where Harley Westford had first broken in upon his reverie.

The lamps were still burning on the long table of polished oak; the wines still glowed with ruby lustre in the diamond-cut decanters.

But the room was not empty. Seated by the

table, with the *Times* newspaper in his hand, Rupert Godwin beheld Jacob Danielson, the man who of all others he would have least wished to encounter at that moment.

The banker had buttoned his coat across his breast after that meeting with his daughter, and the blood-stain was no longer visible. But he could not repress a sudden start at sight of his clerk.

“You here, Danielson!” he exclaimed; “I thought you were on your way to London.”

“No; I was too late for the train, and so walked back to ask a night’s hospitality. I might have gone by the midnight train, of course; but then, you see, my landlady is a very particular sort of person, and it wouldn’t do for me to go back to my lodgings in the dead of the night; so I ventured to return here. I hope I shall not be considered an intruder.”

“O, not at all,” answered Rupert, dropping

suddenly into an arm-chair. "Will you be good enough to touch the bell?"

"Certainly. You are looking very pale."

"Yes, I was seized with a spasm of the heart just now. I am subject to that sort of thing," replied the banker coolly. Then he added to the servant who entered the room, "Bring me some brandy."

The man brought a decanter of brandy. Rupert Godwin half filled a tumbler with the spirit, and drained it to the last drop.

"And so you lost the train, and walked over here?" he asked of Danielson presently.

"Yes; I dismissed your man with the dog-cart before I discovered that the train had started, so I had no alternative but to walk back."

"You must have walked uncommonly fast," said the banker thoughtfully.

"Yes; I'm rather a fast walker. But where's our friend the Captain?"

“Gone, half an hour ago.”

“You contrived to pacify him, then?”

“O, yes. He agreed to let me have the use of his money till his return from China. I shall pay him rather a high rate of interest.”

“Ah, to be sure,” answered the clerk, rubbing his chin in that slow and meditative manner which was peculiar to him, and staring thoughtfully at his employer, who drank another half tumbler of brandy. “And so the Captain walked to the railway station. You directed him to go by a cross cut through the park, I suppose?”

“Yes.”

“By the grotto and fernery, eh?”

“Yes; I sent him that way,” answered the banker rather abstractedly.

“Strange!” said the clerk. “I ought to have met him, for I came that way.”

“Very likely he took the wrong path; these

sailors never are very good hands at steering their course on shore."

"No; to be sure. And the careless fellow has left his coat behind him, I see," said Danielson, pointing to Harley Westford's light overcoat, which hung on the back of a distant chair.

"Very careless," answered the banker. "And now, as I am rather tired, I will wish you good-night, Danielson. The servants will show you to your room. Try some of that cognac. It is quite a liqueur."

"It ought to be rather mild," answered the clerk; "for I never saw you take so much brandy as you've drunk within the last five minutes."

Rupert Godwin left the dining-room, and went up the broad oak staircase to his own apartment—a lofty and spacious chamber, furnished with dark carved oak, relieved by hangings of green velvet.

Here the mask fell from the assassin's face ; here the guilty man dared to be himself.

He dropped heavily into a chair, and, covering his face with his hands, groaned aloud.

"It was horrible," he muttered, "very horrible ; and yet, they say, revenge is sweet. Years ago I hungered for vengeance as some famished animal may hunger for his prey. And now it is mine. I am avenged, Clara Ponsonby. You will never look upon my rival again."

The banker plunged his hand into his waistcoat, and drew from thence a long Spanish dagger of bright blue steel.

From the point half-way towards the hilt the blade was stained with blood.

"His blood !" muttered Rupert Godwin ; "the blood of the man I have hated for twenty years ; and only met for the first time to-day ! The ways of destiny are strange."

The banker rose from his chair, and went to

an old-fashioned ebony cabinet, in a secret drawer of which he placed the dagger.

“No living creature but myself knows the secret of that spring,” he said to himself. “They must be clever who find the weapon that killed Harley Westford.”

Then, after a pause, he murmured :

“The weapon that killed him! Can I be certain that he is dead?”

And again, after a pause, he muttered :

“Bah! How should he survive to-night’s work? The stroke of the dagger was sure enough; and then the fall down the steep flight of steps. Can there be any doubt of his death? And again, if he survived the dagger-stroke and the fall, he must perish from loss of blood, cold, or even famine.”

There was something demoniac in the face of Rupert Godwin as he contemplated this horrible alternative.

“And the twenty thousand pounds are mine !” he exclaimed triumphantly, after a long pause ; “mine—for ever ; to deal with as I please. That sum may help me to sustain the shattered credit of my house. Fresh speculations may float me back to fortune. I may surmount all my difficulties, as I have surmounted the difficulty of to-night. What is it, after all ?—this crime, which is so hideous to contemplate, so awful to remember ? One bold sudden stroke, and the thing is done. This man’s life comes to an end, as it might have come to an end a few days hence in some squall at sea. What is the world the worse for his loss, or how am I the worse for what I have done ?”

This was the argument which this man held with himself in that first pause after the commission of the dread act which must separate him for evermore in thought and feeling from men with clean hands and sinless hearts.

He was not sorry for what he had done. He was disturbed by no feeling of compassion or regret for his victim. But he felt that he had done a deed the weight and influence of which upon his future existence he had yet to discover.

It seemed to him as if some physical transformation had been worked upon him since the doing of that awful deed. He no longer breathed, or moved, or spoke with a sense of ease and freedom. His respiration was troubled, his limbs seemed to have lost their elasticity; when he spoke, his voice sounded strange to him.

“It is a kind of nightmare,” he said to himself, “and will pass away as quickly as it came. I have lived in lands where men hold each other’s lives very lightly. Am I the man to play the coward because this insolent sailor’s days have been cut shorter by so many months or years? Why did he come here to brave and defy me in my own house? He did not know what a des-

perate man he came to defy. He did not know what good cause I had to hate him."

Excited by such thoughts as these, the banker paced up and down his spacious room, with his arms folded and his head bent upon his breast.

Suddenly he stopped, and a look of terror passed across his face.

"The receipt!" he exclaimed. "Powers of hell! the receipt for the twenty thousand pounds! What if that should have fallen into other hands?"

Then, after a pause, he muttered:

"No, it is scarcely possible. The man would have kept it in his own possession. It is buried in the dark vault where he lies, never to rise again upon this earth."

But in the next moment the banker remembered the coat which Harley Westford had left in the dining-room.

"If by any chance the receipt should be in one of the pockets of that coat!" he thought, as he

stood motionless in the centre of the room. After a moment's hesitation he snatched a candle from the dressing-table, left his room, and went down to the hall below.

He went into the dining-room. There all was deserted. The lamps were out; Jacob Danielson was gone; but the Captain's coat still hung on the chair where he had left it.

Rupert Godwin ransacked the pockets; but there was no shred of paper to be found in any one of them.

“What if Danielson should have examined them before me, and should have secured the receipt!” exclaimed the banker. “That would indeed be destruction. But no; surely, careless as these seafaring men may be, Harley Westford would never have carried the only document representing his fortune in the pocket of a loose overcoat.”

CHAPTER V.

LOVE'S YOUNG DREAM.

SLOWLY, very slowly, did Mrs. Westford recover from that attack of brain fever which had been brought on by the grief and excitement of her parting with her husband. It was no ordinary grief which had reduced her to this alarming condition—she had succumbed beneath the influence of a strange and unconquerable presentiment which had oppressed her during the long night of watching that preceded Captain Westford's departure.

Long and patiently through those bright mid-summer days did Violet watch in the sick-chamber, while Lionel, scarcely less devoted, was faithful to his post in the pretty boudoir adjoining his mother's room. Never had a mother been blessed

by more affectionate children; never had more loving eyes kept watch by a sick-bed.

But sometimes in the pleasantest hour of the June evening, when the western sky was rosy with the last glory of the setting sun, Lionel Westford would insist upon Violet going out for a constitutional walk, while he took her place beside his mother's bed.

“It is no use talking, Violet,” he said; “if you don't get a little fresh air after a long day's watching and fatigue, you will make yourself as ill as poor mamma, and it will be small comfort for her to find you an invalid when she recovers. Go, dear, and take a nice long ramble in the forest, and come back fresh and blooming to get a good night's rest. Remember, Miss Vio, in the absence of papa I am your responsible guardian. So no disobedience, miss. Put on your hat and depart.”

If the light-hearted young man had been a

close observer, he would have wondered, perhaps, at the blushes which dyed Violet's cheeks whenever these evening rambles were discussed.

Hesitating and confused in her manner, she would seem one minute as if she most earnestly wished to go, and in the next would plead almost piteously to be allowed to stay in the peaceful sanctuary of her mother's room.

But Lionel was obstinate where he thought Violet's welfare was concerned, and insisted on these evening rambles.

"I should go with you and see that you took a regular constitutional, miss," he would say; "but I am determined that our mother shall never be left entirely to hired service, however faithful and devoted that service might be. If you don't like going alone, you can take one of the servants with you; but you need scarcely go out of ear-shot of the house."

All this time Clara Westford lay feeble and

helpless, her mind disordered by feverish visions, in which she always saw her husband surrounded by peril and tempest.

The doctor reported favourably, but he owned that her recovery might be slow and tedious.

The mind had been very much shaken, he said, by the shock of that parting with Harley Westford.

So when the sun was low in the west, Violet was wont to leave her mother's room and to go out alone into the forest glades that stretched beyond the gardens of the Grange.

No English scenery could be more lovely than that Hampshire woodland, with its rich undergrowth of fern and hazel, its glimpses of sunshine and depth of shadow.

And surely no lovelier nymph ever adorned a classic forest than she who now wandered forth in the quiet evening, with wild-flowers twisted in the ribbon of her broad straw hat.

So she went forth one evening about a week

after that interview between the banker and his victim at Wilmington Hall.

She crossed the broad lawn, went along the narrow path that led through the shrubbery, and left the Grange gardens by a little wooden gate that opened at once into the forest. Her face was pale now, though it had been rosy with bright blushes when she left her brother. She did not keep within earshot of the house, as Lionel had supposed she would do, but struck at once into a narrow footpath that wound in and out amongst the grand old trees, and wandered on, sometimes slowly, sometimes at an almost rapid pace, till she came to a grassy patch of land shut in by a tall screen of elm and beech, with here and there the spreading branches of an oak. It was a most lovely spot, an enchanted circle wherein Vivien might have hushed the magician to his charmed sleep. The fern grew tall amongst the broad brown trunks of the old trees, and in the dis-

tance a glassy sheet of water reflected the evening sky.

It was a lovely spot; and it was not untenanted. A young man sat on a low camp-seat, with an artist's portable easel before him.

He was not working at the water-colour sketch on the easel. He was sitting in rather a melancholy attitude, and his eyes were fixed upon that opening in the forest in which Violet appeared.

He was very handsome; dark, with deep gray eyes fringed by long black lashes—eyes which more often looked black than gray. He was very handsome, and his appearance was that of a man upon whom the stamp of gentle blood had been indelibly fixed. This air of high breeding was a part of himself, and not borrowed from the clothes he wore; for no costume could be more indefinite in its character than his velveteen shooting-jacket and gray waistcoat and trousers, which might

have been alike suitable to a gamekeeper, a pedlar, or a gentleman on a pedestrian tour.

No sooner had the first glimpse of Violet Westford's white dress appeared in the forest pathway than the young artist sprang from his seat and ran to meet her.

“My own darling!” he exclaimed; “how late you are, and how long the time has seemed—how cruelly long!”

Now, when a gentleman addresses a lady as “his own darling,” it must be presumed that the lady and gentleman have met very often, and are on very good terms with each other.

“I could not come earlier, George,” the girl said gently; “and even now I feel as if I were very wicked to come at all. O, if mamma were well, and I could tell her of our engagement! If I could take you to her! O, George, you do not know her, if you think that your poverty would stand in your way. She would never ask me to

marry a man I did not sincerely love. And if she liked you, I'm sure she'd be the last person to consider whether you were rich or poor."

The young man sighed heavily, and did not immediately answer this maidenly speech.

But after a pause he said :

"Your mother may be a very generous woman, Violet, but there are others who are not so generous. There are some who worship only one god, the Golden Calf; some there are who bow themselves down before that modern Moloch, and would offer up the heart's blood of their own children as mercilessly as the Carthaginians cast their offspring into the furnaces that burned beneath the feet of Belsamen. You do not know the world, my Violet, as I know it, or you would never talk of poverty being no barrier between us."

"But neither my father nor my mother are money-worshippers," pleaded the loving girl.

"Papa is the most simple-hearted of men, and I

have only to confess to him that I have been foolish enough to fall in love with a poor unknown artist, whose sole fortune consists of a sheaf of brushes, a palette, a portable easel, and a camp-stool, and he will give his consent immediately—that is to say, as soon as he knows you, George; for, at the risk of making you very conceited, I must confess that he can't know you without liking you."

"My dear, foolish girl!"

"Wasn't mamma charmed with you last Christmas, when we met you at the ball at Winchester?—only she mistook you for a man of fortune, and little knew that you were a poor wandering artist, lodging at a cottage in the forest. You have really such an aristocratic air, George, that one would imagine you had twenty thousand a year."

A dark shade passed over the young man's face.

"If I had five hundred a year, my darling, I

should have contrived to get an introduction to your father before he left England, and should have boldly asked for this dear little hand. But I am a pauper, Violet. I am a dependant, and the lowest of dependants, for I am a dependant on a man I cannot esteem."

Violet Westford looked at her lover's gloomy face with an air of mingled distress and bewilderment.

"But it will not be always so, George," she said. "You will be a great painter some day, and then all the world will be at your feet."

The young man's moody expression vanished as he looked down at the bright face lifted to his.

"My beautiful young dreamer!" he exclaimed. "No; I have no such ambitious visions of triumph and greatness; but I hope some day to win a name that will at least give me independence. To that end I work; and you know that I work hard, my darling."

“Yes, indeed, I am sometimes afraid your health will suffer.”

“There is no fear of that, Violet. See here. You must see the result of my day’s labour, and approve, or I shall not rest happily to-night. You are all the world to me now, Violet.”

The young painter led the girl to the easel, and she stood by his side for some minutes gazing in silent rapture upon the water-colour drawing before her.

She had no artistic knowledge—no experience; and yet she felt somehow that the work before her bore upon it the divine impress of genius.

It was only the picture of that forest glade, with the deep fern, the broad sheet of unrippled water, the rosy glow of the sunset, and the figure of a deer drinking.

But the soul of a poet had inspired the hand of the painter, and there was a quiet beauty about the picture that went home to the heart.

“O, you will be great, George!” exclaimed the girl, after that long silent gaze upon the picture. “I feel that you will be great.”

She looked up at him with her earnest eyes of darkest, deepest blue, and clasped two little loving hands about his arm.

He needed no higher praise than this. Glory might come to him by and by, and gold with it; but this one passionate thrill of delight was the thing neither glory nor gold could buy for him.

For some little time the lovers wandered together in the forest glade, supremely happy, forgetful for a while of all the earth, except that one verdant spot hidden in the heart of the woodland.

Then, as long streaks of crimson dyed the grass, Violet hurried homewards, with her lover still by her side. It was only when they were near the gate opening into the gardens of the Grange that the young painter reluctantly withdrew.

Heaven knows, their meetings were pure and

innocent as if they had been denizens of the fairy realms of Oberon and Titania; but Violet felt a pang of something like guilt as she returned to the sick-room, and seated herself once more by her mother's bed.

“How hard to keep a secret from such a darling mother!” thought the girl, with a sigh. “I will tell her all directly she recovers. George cannot refuse me that privilege. I will tell her all, and she will smile at our folly and sympathise with our hopes, and believe, as I do, in that bright future when George Stanmore will be the name of a great painter.”

Comforted by such thoughts as these, a sweet smile crept over Violet Westford's face as she watched her mother's slumbers, which to-night were more peaceful than they had been since the Captain's departure.

The story of Violet's acquaintance with the wandering artist is a very simple one.

The lovers first met at a ball at Winchester—a grand county ball, where only people of unblemished respectability were admitted. Here Mrs. Westford and Violet met Mr. Stanmore, who came with one of the officers stationed there, an old schoolfellow, as he said. The young stranger made a very favourable impression upon both ladies, and danced several times with the younger.

After this, Lionel and his sister frequently encountered the stranger in their winter walks and drives in the forest. He made no secret of his profession, but told them at once that he was a landscape-painter, and that he was living in very humble lodgings in the forest, in order that he might study nature face to face.

Sometimes they found him seated in a little canvas tent, buttoned to the chin in a thick great-coat, and working hard at a study of some grand old oak, gaunt and brown, against the wintry sky.

Little by little, therefore, the young people grew very intimate with Mr. George Stanmore, the artist. Lionel was much pleased with his new acquaintance. But during the warm spring months Lionel Westford had been away at the University, and Violet had been obliged to walk alone in the forest—for Mrs. Westford's active charities engaged the greater part of her time, as she devoted herself much to visiting the poor in the villages within a few miles of the Grange.

Sometimes Violet accompanied her upon these missions of charity; but there were many days upon which the young girl went alone into the forest, sometimes on foot, sometimes riding a pet pony, that had been honoured with the name of Oberon.

But, whether she rode Oberon or went on foot, and whichever pathway she took, Violet Westford was sure to meet George Stanmore.

The rest is easily told. They had seen and

loved each other. From the very first, unknown to either, that divine lamp of love had shone in the breast of each—innovent, unselfish love, which the trials of life, the cruel tempests of the world, might distress and torture, but could never wholly quench. It was true love, which knows no base alloy of selfish fear or mercenary caution. Violet Westford would have united her fortunes to George Stanmore though he had been a beggar, and would have blindly trusted Providence with her future; and the only prudential motive that withheld the young man from pressing his suit was the fear that she whom he so tenderly loved might suffer by his impetuosity.

“Not till I have won independence will I ask her to be my wife,” he thought. “No, not till I can look the world in the face, reliant upon my own right hand for support.”

CHAPTER VI.

THE STORY OF THE PAST.

CLARA WESTFORD recovered slowly, but she did recover; a faint flush came back to the wan cheeks, a new brightness lit up in the eyes that had been so haggard.

That process of recovery was very painful. When the invalid's weary hours of delirium and stupor were over—when unreal afflictions, visions of horror and dread, had ceased to torture the agonised and bewildered mind, real sorrow, stern and cruel, awaited Clara Westford.

The first syllables that fell from her lips, when reason returned, formed a question about her husband.

“ Was there any letter ? ” she asked. “ Had any letter come from Harley ? ”

Alas, for that anxious wife, the answer was in the negative ; no letter had arrived from the Captain.

Neither Violet nor Lionel had been rendered uneasy by their father’s silence. They fancied that if he had not written, it was because he had had no opportunity of sending a letter.

But the wife was distracted by a thousand fears. Her husband had left her declaring his intention of depositing the entire amount of his savings in a banker’s hands, and immediately sending her the receipt for the money.

The fortune itself was a secondary consideration in Clara Westford’s mind ; yet she knew her husband’s anxiety upon that point, and she could not but wonder that he had omitted to write to her on the subject before leaving England ; or, failing to write before setting sail from London, she

wondered that he had not contrived to send a letter ashore before losing sight of the English coast.

She was distracted by fears, so shadowy in their nature that she could scarcely give utterance to them. Her children perceived her uneasiness, and endeavoured to set her fears at rest.

“My dearest mother,” exclaimed Lionel, “do you think, if there were really cause for fear, that I should not also be uneasy? Do you forget the old proverb, which tells us that ill news flies fast? If anything had been amiss with my father before the Lily Queen lost sight of England, Gilbert Thornleigh would have been sure to write to us. You know how devoted he is to my father; and, indeed, to all of us,” added the young man, looking with peculiar significance at Violet, who blushed, and moved to an open window near her to avoid that searching gaze.

Everybody at the Grange had perceived the

impression made by Violet on the simple-hearted first mate of the Lily Queen.

Clara Westford tried to smile upon the loving son and daughter, who watched her every look with anxious eyes. She smiled, but it was the smile of resignation, not of peace. Her heart was racked by hidden torture, yet she suffered no cry of despair to escape her lips. For the sake of Lionel and Violet she tried to suppress all outward evidence of her anguish, and waited, hoping day after day that ere the sun set a letter might reach her, sent by some homeward-bound vessel, to assure her of Harley Westford's safety.

“He knows how much I suffer when he is away,” she thought. “He will not fail to write whenever the opportunity occurs.”

It was a fearful time—a long, dreary interval of suspense and anxiety. Lionel was happy; for, with the careless, light-hearted confidence of youth that has never been clouded by sorrow, he trusted

blindly in the future. All his father's previous voyages had been prosperous, why should not this voyage be like the rest?

And Violet, she too was happy, with the wondrous happiness of a first love—true, pure, and boundless. Now that her mother was restored to health, it seemed to her as if there were no cloud upon the brightness of her life. What if George Stanmore were poor? Her father would return, and poverty would be no disgrace in the eyes of that most generous of fathers.

So the summer time passed happily for the lovers, who met often in the beautiful woodland, sometimes alone, sometimes in the presence of Lionel, who saw that the painter admired his sister, but had no suspicion of any deeper feeling existing between the two. This is a subject upon which brothers are very slow of understanding. They think their sisters very nice girls, but are rather surprised than otherwise when some mas-

culine friend declares that the nice girl is something akin to an angel.

If Lionel had suspected the truth, he would scarcely have interfered to cross the path of that true love. He had no mercenary ambition, either for his sister or himself; and the hard schooling of adversity had not yet taught him prudence.

The summer waned; bright hues of crimson and amber mingled with the verdant green of the forest, the fern grew brown, the country children came whooping through the echoing glades, bent on the plunder of sloe and hazel, beech and chestnut; the days grew shorter, and the little family at the Grange spent long quiet evenings in the lamp-lit drawing-room.

But still there was no letter from Harley Westford—no tidings of the Lily Queen.

Mrs. Westford and her son and daughter had many friends amongst the neighbouring county families; but they saw little company during this

period, for Clara had always held herself very much aloof from society during her husband's absence.

All who were intimate with her admired and loved her; but there were some who knew little of Clara Westford, and who pronounced her proud and exclusive.

She was proud, because her husband's position as a merchant captain was beneath that of the county gentry, who had never dabbled in trade or speculation, and who could not quite realise the fact that the owner of a trading-vessel might be a gentleman.

Clara was proud for his sake; not for her own.

"I will go to no house where my husband is not esteemed an honoured guest," she said.

She was exclusive, because her affection was concentrated into one focus. She loved her husband and children with a deep and devoted love,

and she had little affection left for the world outside that happy household.

Three months had passed since the sailing of the *Lily Queen*; and yet there was no tidings of the Captain.

To Clara, and to Clara alone, this was a cause of alarm. Lionel and Violet still trusted blindly, almost too happy to believe in the existence of misfortune.

One bright autumn day Clara Westford sent her son and daughter on a shopping expedition to Winchester. She was pleased to see them employed and happy; for she had no wish that any part of her burden should be borne by them. It was a relief to her to be alone, so that she might give way to her own sorrow, free from the loving scrutiny of those watchful eyes.

She sat in the Grange drawing-room, a large low-ceilinged apartment, with long windows opening on to the lawn.

The day was warm and bright; and the open windows admitted the pure air from the gardens and woodland. Clara Westford sat in a half-reclining position in a low arm-chair near one of the windows. A little table loaded with books was by her side; but the volumes lay there unopened and unheeded. She could not read; her thoughts were far away—on those terrible and unknown seas where the Lily Queen was sailing.

Never, perhaps, in the earliest bloom of her girlhood, had Clara Westford looked lovelier than she did to-day.

It was the subdued beauty of womanhood, calm and quiet as the mellow light of the moon compared with the full glory of the noontide sun.

She was exquisitely dressed, for she was too completely high-bred to neglect her toilette on any occasion. She was not a woman who made sorrow or anxiety an excuse for slovenly attire. Her chestnut hair was coiled in thick plaits at the

back of her small classical head, and fastened with a simple tortoiseshell comb. Her silk dress was of a golden brown, which harmonised exquisitely with the fair clear complexion and chestnut hair—the brown which Millais has immortalised in the dress of his red-coated squire's fair-haired daughter. A large turquoise, set in a rim of lustreless gold, clasped the small white collar, and a stud of exactly the same fashion fastened each simple cuff of spotless cambric. A few costly rings, all of turquoise and gold, adorned the tapering white hands, and these were the only ornaments worn by the Captain's wife.

She sat alone, thinking—O, how fondly, how mournfully!—of her absent husband, when suddenly the curtains of the window farthest from her were pushed aside with a jangling noise, and a man entered the room.

Clara Westford looked up, startled by that sound, and a half-stifled shriek burst from her lips.

“You here!” she cried. “*You* here!”

The intruder was no other than Rupert Godwin, the Lombard-street banker.

He advanced slowly towards the spot where Clara Westford sat. His dark face was just a little paler than usual, and there was a stern resolute look in his eyes.

“Yes,” he answered quietly, “it is I, Clara Westford. After twenty years we meet face to face for the first time to-day, and I look once again upon the woman who has been the curse and torment of my life.”

Clara Westford shrank back into the cushioned chair almost as if she had been recoiling from a blow.

“O, merciful Heaven!” she exclaimed, clasping her hands passionately; “after twenty years of happiness am I to hear that hated voice again?”

“Yes, Clara,” answered the banker; “for twenty years there has been a truce. To-day the

war begins again, and this time it shall not end until I am conqueror."

The Captain's wife clasped her hands before her face ; but she uttered no further appeal. She sat shivering, as if chilled to the very heart by some sudden blast of freezing wind.

"Ah, Clara, you are as beautiful as ever, but you have lost some of your old haughty spirit," said the banker. "The merchant captain's wife is not so proud as the baronet's daughter."

"A hundred times more proud!" cried Clara, dropping her hands from her face, and looking suddenly at Rupert Godwin. "A hundred times more proud! For she has her husband's honour to protect as well as her own."

"Bravely spoken, Clara—nobly spoken! You are the same imperious beauty still, I see, and the conquest will be a noble one. This time I will not fail!"

“Why are you here?” cried Mrs. Westford.
“How did you discover this place?”

“From your husband. But you shall know more of that by and by.”

“From my husband? Ah! he came to you, then?—you saw him before he sailed?”

“Yes; I saw him.”

“He deposited money to a large amount in your hands?”

The banker looked at Clara Westford with an insolent smile.

“My dear Clara, you must surely be dreaming!” he exclaimed. “Your husband deposited no money in my hands, nor was he in a position to do so.”

“What do you mean?”

“Simply, that when Harley Westford came to me he was a beggar. He came to borrow money to pay for some part of the cargo of his ship, and he deposited with me the title-deeds of this

estate, as a security for the amount advanced to him."

"He borrowed money from you!" cried Clara, clasping her hands upon her forehead with a convulsive gesture. "Why, he told me that he meant to lodge twenty thousand pounds in your hands!"

"He told you a falsehood, then; for the whole of his earnings were lost in some foreign speculations in which he had involved himself, and it was only with the help of borrowed money that he could start upon this new venture. Do not look at me with that incredulous stare, my dear Clara; I do not ask you to accept this fact on the simple evidence of my word. I have documents bearing your husband's signature to prove the truth of what I state. When you hold those papers in your hands you may be able to believe me."

"O, it's too terrible!" exclaimed the wretched wife; "it is too bitter. Harley, my husband,

under an obligation to you—to you, of all other men upon this earth!”

“Yes,” answered the banker, with a smile. “It was strange that he should come to me, was it not? Very strange! It was one of those startling accidents which go to make the drama of social life.”

There was a pause. Clara Westford was silent. She was thinking of her last interview with her husband, and recalling the words he had then spoken.

Could it be that he had deceived her as to the state of his affairs? Could it be, that, with the weakness and cowardice of intense affection, he had sought to hide from her the approach of ruin?

It might be so; such things had been. Love shrinks, with a cowardly weakness, from inflicting pain upon the thing it loves.

“He might have trusted me,” she thought sadly. “Did he think I should fear poverty that

was to be shared with him? After twenty years of union can he know me so little as to think that?"

Clara Westford hated and despised Rupert Godwin, and she would have been inclined to disbelieve any assertion made by him to the detriment of the man she loved; but she ceased to doubt him when he boldly offered to produce her husband's signature in confirmation of his words.

"Let me see Harley's own handwriting in support of this statement," she said presently; "then, and not till then, can I believe you."

"All in good time, my dear Clara. You shall see your husband's signature, believe me; perhaps only too soon for your own comfort. But we need not forestall that time. In the meanwhile, let us look back upon the past. After twenty years of truce the war is to begin again; and this time it shall be a duel to the death. Let us look back upon the past, Clara Westford—let us recall that old story."

“What, Mr. Godwin!” cried the Captain’s wife indignantly. “Are you not ashamed to recall the hateful part you played in that story?”

“I only want to prove to you how well I have remembered. Let me recall that story, Clara.”

There was no answer. Mrs. Westford turned from him and covered her face with her hands once more, as if she would fain have shut out sight and sound; but, in a cold merciless voice, Rupert Godwin began thus:

“Twenty-two years ago, Clara Westford, I spent the autumn at a fashionable watering-place on the south coast. The place was crowded that season with all that was most elegant, most distinguished, most aristocratic. But even amongst that high-born crowd I did not find myself an intruder. The reputation of my father’s wealth went with me, and there was a kind of golden glory about my untitled name. I had been educated in the greatest cities of the world, and was

completely a man of the world, with no vulgar prejudices as to religion or morals. My youth had been somewhat stormy, and those who pretended to know most about me whispered dark histories in which my name was mingled—not pleasantly. In a few words, Clara, I was not a man to be trifled with, or fooled, by a girl of seventeen.”

There was a brief pause, and then the banker continued :

“ There were many beautiful women at that pleasant seaside town ; but the loveliest of them all, the acknowledged belle, the observed of all observers, was the only daughter of Sir John Ponsoby, a rich Yorkshire baronet of very old family. Need I tell you how lovely she was, Clara ? She is lovely still ; with a more subdued beauty, but with as great a charm as she bore in her brilliant youth. She was a dazzling creature. I met her at a charity-ball—on the sands—in the

reading-rooms—on horseback with her father, a thoroughgoing Tory of the old school, and as proud as Lucifer or a Spanish hidalgo. I met her constantly, for I haunted all the places where there was any chance of seeing her. The very sight of that girl dazzled me like the sudden glory of the sun. I loved her, with a mad, wild, unreasonable passion; and I determined that she should be my wife.”

For a moment Clara Westford uncovered her face, and looked at the banker with a quiet scornful smile.

“ Ah, I understand the meaning of that smile, Clara,” said Rupert Godwin. “ I was presumptuous, was I not, when I determined to win this woman for my wife? But remember, she had fooled me on; she had smiled upon me, and encouraged me by her sweetest words, her brightest glances. She was surrounded by a crowd of admirers; but I was one of the most distinguished

amongst them; and it seemed to me that she singled me out from the rest, and took more pleasure in talking to me than to the others. There were strangers who thought so too; and the likelihood of our speedy marriage was soon the public talk of the place."

"She was a weak, frivolous girl," murmured Clara; "but she meant no wrong."

"She meant no wrong!" echoed the banker. "There are men who commit murder, and then declare they meant no wrong. This woman did me a deep and bitter wrong. She fed my mad passion, she encouraged my wild devotion; and then, when I went to her, confident, hopeful, blindly believing that I was beloved again—when I went to her and told her how dearly she was loved, she turned upon me, and slew me with a look of cold surprise, telling me that she was the promised wife of another man."

The banker paused for a few moments; then,

in a suppressed voice, a voice which was low and hoarse with stifled passion, he proceeded :

“ I was not the man to take this quietly, Clara Westford. I was not one of those puling creatures who avow their power to forget and forgive. In my heart there was no such thing as forgiveness; in my nature there was no such thing as forgetfulness. I left Clara Ponsonby with a tempest of passion raging in my breast. That night, after roaming alone for hours on the broad open sands, far away from the glimmering lights of the town, where no living creature but myself heard the long roar of the ocean—that night, with my clenched hand lifted to the stars of heaven, I swore a terrible oath. I swore that, sooner or later, Clara Ponsonby should be mine—not as my honoured wife, but mine by a less honourable tie. The cup of degradation she had offered to me—to *me*, the proud descendant of a proud race—*her* lips should drain to the lowest dregs. I was not a

man to work in the dark. I saw my lovely Clara next day, and told her of the oath that I had sworn. She too came of a proud race, and she defied me."

"She did," answered the Captain's wife, "as she defies you now."

"For six months the contest lasted," continued the banker. "For six months that silent warfare was waged. Wherever Clara Ponsonby was seen, I was seen near her. I followed her from place to place. Her father liked and trusted me, so she could not banish me from her presence without betraying her secret engagement to another—a man who was her inferior in station, and whom her father would have refused to admit as a claimant for his daughter's hand. Clara was dumb, therefore; and, however odious my presence might be, she was compelled to submit to its infliction. I stood behind her chair in her opera-box. I rode beside her carriage when she drove in the Park. I did *not* succeed in ousting the low-born

rival for whose sake I had been rejected ; but I *did* succeed in humiliating Miss Ponsonby in the eyes of the world. Before that season was over the fashionable circle in which Clara lived was busy with slanderous rumours against her fair fame. I had managed very cleverly. I had friends—sycophant followers—always ready to do my bidding. An idle jest, a significant shrug of the shoulders, a little damaging gossip at a club-dinner, and the business was accomplished. Before that season came to its close Clara Ponsonby's reputation was blighted. The poisonous whispers reached her father's ear—I took care they should ; and the proud old man, believing in his daughter's disgrace, cast her from his household, declaring that he would never look on her face again."

A convulsive sobbing shook Clara Westford's frame ; but she uttered no word—no cry.

"In that hour I fancied myself triumphant," continued Rupert Godwin. "Abandoned, deso-

late, ruined in reputation, I thought that Clara Ponsonby would have sought the luxurious home which she knew I had prepared against this day. My letters had told her of my hopes, my plans; the new home that awaited her; the passionate devotion that might still be hers. My emissaries watched her as she left her father's house; but—O, bitter anguish and disappointment!—it was not to me that she came. She went to Southampton, and embarked on board a steamer bound for Malta; and a month afterwards I read in the *Times* an announcement of the marriage of Harley Westford, captain of the merchant vessel *Adventurer*, to Clara Ponsonby. At Malta she had joined the man to whom she was engaged. His life had been spent far away from the circles in which she moved, and no breath of scandal against her had ever reached his ear. That, Clara, is the end of the first act of the drama. The second act began three months ago, when

Harley Westford, your husband, the man for whose sake you insulted and scorned me, came into my office in Lombard-street."

Clara Westford suddenly rose from her seat and turned towards the banker, proud and defiant of look and gesture.

"Leave this house!" she exclaimed, pointing to the door. "It is disgraced and degraded by your presence. Twenty years ago, when you intruded yourself upon me, you found me in my father's house, from which I had no power to dismiss you. This house is my own, Rupert Godwin. I command you to leave it, and never again darken its threshold by your hated shadow!"

"Those are strong words, Clara, and I cannot do otherwise than obey them. I go; but only for a time. The time will come when I may have a better right of entrance to this house. In the mean while, I depart; but before I do so, let me

show you a paragraph in this newspaper, which may perhaps have some interest for you."

As he said this, Rupert Godwin handed Mrs. Westford a copy of the *Times*, in which one paragraph was marked by a heavy black line drawn against it with a pen.

The paragraph ran as follows :

"The underwriters of Lloyds' are beginning to have serious fears about the trading-vessel Lily Queen, which sailed from London Docks on the 27th of last June, bound for China, and has not since been heard of."

The paper dropped from Clara Westford's hands ; she could read no farther, but with a long shriek of agony fell senseless on the floor.

"Ah, Clara!" exclaimed the banker, looking down at that prostrate form with a cruel smile upon his face, "I said truly that the second act of our life-drama has begun."

CHAPTER VII.

THE STOLEN LETTER.

THE banker took no measures for reviving Clara Westford from the fainting-fit into which she had fallen after the perusal of that paragraph in the *Times*.

She had fallen backwards, and her pale still face was turned towards the ceiling.

Rupert Godwin knelt beside her, and examined that white statuesque face with a long and earnest scrutiny.

“Quite unconscious!” he exclaimed, as he lifted Mrs. Westford’s unresisting hand, and watched it fall inert and lifeless. “Death itself could scarcely be less conscious of surrounding events. Nothing could be better.”

The banker rose from his knees, and with a soft and cautious footstep walked slowly round the room.

It was charmingly furnished, and it bore the traces of constant occupation. There was an open work-table, an open piano, a box of water-colours, and upon a table by one of the windows there was an elegant little walnut-wood easel. In a comfortable corner near the fire-place stood a desk in different-coloured woods, with an easy-chair before it. The lid of the desk was closed, but a bunch of keys hung from the lock.

“It looks like her desk,” muttered the banker, “and if so, I can scarcely fail to find what I want.”

He glanced once more at the figure lying on the sunlit floor.

Clara Westford had not stirred.

Then, with careful fingers, Rupert Godwin lifted the lid of the desk and looked within.

In a row of pigeon-holes before him he saw

numerous packets of letters, some tied with common red tape, others with blue ribbon.

“Those are *his* letters,” muttered the banker, with a sneer. “I would wager a small fortune that those are *his* letters which she has tied with that dainty blue ribbon. Sir John Ponsonby’s haughty daughter can be as sentimental as a schoolgirl, I daresay, where her dashing Captain is concerned.”

He took out one of the packets.

Yes, upon the uppermost envelope was written —“From my husband.”

“Let me see how the fellow signs his name,” said Rupert Godwin. “Perhaps he uses only initials, and I shall be balked that way. I must have his full signature.”

The banker drew one of the letters from the packet, and took it from its envelope.

It was a very long letter, and it was signed in full—“Harley Westford.”

“Yes, the Fates favour my schemes,” muttered Rupert Godwin, as he put the single letter in his waistcoat-pocket, and replaced the packet in the pigeon-hole from which he had taken it.

Then, after one last look at Clara Westford, he left the room.

He went to the hall, where he rang a bell violently. A female servant hurried to answer his summons, and started back in alarm at the sight of a stranger.

“I am an old friend of Mrs. Westford’s,” said Rupert Godwin; “but unhappily I am the bearer of very ill news. Your mistress has fainted; you had better run to her at once. Stay; what is the name of your doctor?”

“Doctor Sanderson, sir, in the village. He lives at the house with the green blinds, please, sir. The first on the left as you pass the Seven Stars, please, sir.”

“I’ll send him, then, immediately.”

“Thank you, sir; thank you.”

The girl ran away, eager to be with her mistress; and the banker left the ill-fated house, whose peace had fled before his ill-omened coming.

He went to the village, and found the house where the surgeon lived. He left a message for that gentleman, and then walked to a little inn where he had left his dog-cart and groom.

He stepped into the vehicle and drove towards Winchester, whence he had come that day. On the road, a little pony-carriage passed him, driven by a girl with bright golden hair, set off by a coquettish little turban hat. A young man was lolling by her side.

That bright happy-looking girl was Violet Westford.

The banker started as if he had seen a ghost, and looked back after the vehicle with an eager gaze.

“Yes, that girl must be her daughter,” he

thought. "How the sight of her recalls the past!—the very day when I met Clara Ponsonby riding by her father's side—the day when sudden love sprang up in my heart, an 'Adam at his birth.' And from that hour to this I have loved her. Yes, I have loved her, though hatred and vengeful thoughts have mingled strangely with my love. I love her; but I would bring her to my feet. I worship her; and yet I would humiliate her to the very dust."

With such thoughts as these in his mind, Rupert Godwin drove back to Winchester, and alighted at the chief hotel in the old city.

He had come to Winchester; but not alone. Crime has terrors and penalties which even the cleverest criminal cannot escape. Rupert Godwin knew that he was to some extent in the power of his old clerk Jacob Danielson, and he determined to make that clerk his accomplice.

"If the old man is with me in my schemes,

and accepts a reward for his service, he can never betray me," he argued with himself.

The banker knew that Jacob Danielson was the slave of two passions—two fatal passions, which render a man the easy prey of any tempter.

These two passions were avarice and the love of strong drink. Jacob Danielson was, in his pettifogging way, a miser; and he was an habitual brandy-drinker.

To get brandy, or to get money, he would have been tempted to sell his soul to the legendary fiend of mediæval times, who seems to have been always on the look-out for that kind of bargain.

The banker had watched his clerk almost as closely as the clerk had watched him, and he knew the weak points of Danielson's character.

"He would like to be my master," thought Rupert Godwin, "and he possesses knowledge that might give him a powerful hold over me; but, in spite of that, I will make him my slave."

In the mean time the banker had determined upon conciliating his clerk in every way. The hand of steel in the velvet glove was exemplified by Mr. Godwin's policy. He had brought Danielson to Winchester with him; and that gentleman was enjoying free quarters at the hotel, and drinking as much brandy as he pleased to call for.

The banker's policy was very simple. He wanted to destroy the only creature he feared, and he thought that he should be able to effect that work of destruction through the agency of Danielson's own vices.

He found the clerk sitting in a parlour at the hotel—a very pleasant apartment, looking into a garden. A decanter half full of brandy stood on the table; but the clerk was sitting in a moody attitude, with his arms folded, and he was not drinking.

The banker looked at his subordinate with

a suspicious glance. Rupert Godwin did not care to see his clerk thus deeply absorbed in thought.

Sharp and rapid in all his habits and manners as Danielson ordinarily was, he seemed this afternoon almost like a creature absorbed in a dream. He turned his eyes slowly towards the banker, and looked at him with a strange unseeing gaze, almost as a blind man might have looked at the sun with his dull sightless orbs.

“Why, Jacob,” cried Rupert Godwin, “what’s the matter with you? You look like a man who has newly awakened from a trance.”

“I have been in a trance,” answered the clerk in a dreamy tone. “I was out in the street just now, and I saw a ghost pass by.”

“A ghost?”

“Yes; a ghost, such as men often see in the broad sunlight—the ghost of my dead youth. I saw a woman—the living image of the only one

creature I ever loved ; and she seemed to me like a phantom."

The clerk sighed as he stretched out his tremulous hand to the decanter and refilled his glass.

"But there's comfort here," he muttered ; "there's always comfort in this. There's not many sorrows that this won't drown, if a man can only get enough of it."

Never had the banker seen his clerk so deeply moved. "Why, Jacob," he exclaimed, "this does indeed surprise me ! I thought you were a man of iron—hard as iron, pitiless as iron, strong as iron ; I never knew you had a heart."

"No more I have," answered the clerk ; "not now—not now. I had a heart once, and it was broken. I was a fool once, and I was made to pay for my folly. But that's long gone by. Come, Mr. Godwin, I'm myself again. You don't pay me to dream ; you pay me to work, and I'm ready for your work, whatever it is. You didn't

bring me down to Winchester for my pleasure, or for yours. You brought me because you had something for me to do. What is it? that's the question."

"A question not to be answered just yet, Jacob," replied the banker. "We'll dine first, and go to business afterwards. The evenings are chilly, so I'll order a fire."

The order was given, and the fire lighted; a well-chosen little dinner was served presently, and the two men seated themselves at the table, which glittered with cut glass and massive plate.

"Strange," thought Rupert Godwin, as he looked furtively at the wizen face of the clerk, "this man talks of the ghost of his dead youth! Have not I, too, seen the phantom of the past—that girl with the violet eyes and the golden hair? She seemed to me like the ghost of the Clara Ponsonby I fell in love with two-and-twenty years ago."

The clerk was by this time quite himself again, and he had resumed that half-servile, half-ironical manner which he generally had with his master.

“This is indeed luxury,” he said, rubbing his dry withered palms, as he looked from the handsomely furnished room to the glittering dinner-table. “It is not every day that I dine like this. You are a good master, Mr. Godwin.”

“I mean to be a liberal one,” answered the banker; “and I will pay you well, if you serve me faithfully. I make no pretence of generosity, but I will pay handsomely for handsome service.”

“Good, Mr. Godwin; the wisest men are those who pretend the least.”

The banker knew that it was useless to play the hypocrite with Jacob Danielson. Clever as Rupert Godwin was, he always felt that the clerk's sharp rat-like eyes could fathom the remotest recesses of his mind.

There was only *one* secret that he believed to



be hidden from Jacob Danielson. That was the secret of Harley Westford's disappearance.

Little more was said during dinner, for the waiters of the hotel were in attendance throughout the repast. Mr. Godwin kept his clerk's glass filled with a succession of expensive wines; and the waiters opened their eyes to their widest extent as they saw the little wizened man pour the sparkling liquids down his throat as fast as they could supply them.

The banker himself did not drink; and this fact did not escape Jacob Danielson, who smiled a cunning smile as he perceived his employer's abstinence.

At last the cloth was removed, and dessert was placed upon the table—the conventional dessert peculiar to provincial hotels, flanked by a decanter of tawny port, and a jug of claret which the head-waiter declared to be genuine Lafitte, and which figured in the wine-carte at eighteen shillings a

bottle. The head-waiter hovered about the table for a few minutes after that noted claret had been set before Mr. Godwin, poked the fire with a profoundly studious air, as of a man who had given a lifetime of study to the science of poking fires, looked meditatively at the two gentlemen as if deliberating upon the possibility of their wanting something else, and anon silently departed.

Then, with the curtains closely drawn, and the waxen lights gleaming from their tall silver branches, the two men drew their chairs closer to the hearth, and settled themselves for the evening.

“Now then for business,” exclaimed the clerk, as the sound of the head-waiter’s boots died away in the distance.

The banker was not quick to reply to this address. He was sitting looking at the fire, brooding darkly. His task was not an easy one, for he was about to ask Danielson to become his accomplice in a crime.

At last he spoke.

“Danielson,” he said gravely, “you and I have been involved in many transactions, some of which the world would scarcely call honest.”

“Some of which the world would call decidedly dishonest,” answered the clerk, with a sinister grin.

“But, then, is it an honest world?” asked the banker.

“O yes; a very honest world, until it is found out.”

“Ay, there’s the difference. The detected villain is a scoundrel only fit for the gallows; the undetected villain may pass for a saint.”

There was a pause, and then the banker said, in a tone which he endeavoured to render indifferent:

“You remember that merchant captain—the man called Harley Westford—who came to Wil-

mingdon Hall to demand the return of that money which he had deposited with me?"

"O yes; I remember him perfectly."

"I am sorry to tell you that the poor fellow is dead."

"Indeed!"

Jacob Danielson looked very steadfastly at the face of his employer, but there was no surprise in the tone in which he uttered that one word "indeed."

"Yes; the Lily Queen has been lost, and all hands with her."

"But how do you know that Harley Westford was on board the Lily Queen?"

"How do I know it? Why, because he was captain and owner of the vessel, and because he declared his intention of sailing with her, without fail. Why should he not sail in the Lily Queen?"

"I can't imagine any reason," answered the clerk, with his steadfast gaze still fixed on the

banker's face, which had grown suddenly pallid. "I really can't imagine any reason; but then, you know, such singular things happen in this life. There may have been something—some accident, to prevent Captain Westford's departure."

"Pshaw!" exclaimed Rupert Godwin. "Utterly impossible! I tell you, man, Harley Westford sailed in the Lily Queen, and has gone down to the bottom of the sea with her and her cargo."

"And in that case Harley Westford's heirs may come upon you at any moment for the twenty thousand pounds deposited in your hands."

"They might come upon me for it, if they had any evidence that it was ever placed in my hands," replied the banker. "But what if they have no such evidence?"

"There is the receipt which you gave Harley Westford."

"Yes; and which has no doubt gone down with him to the depth of the ocean."

“What if he lodged that receipt in other hands before sailing on his Chinese expedition?”

“*That* is scarcely likely. No man ever foresees his own doom. At any rate, I speculate upon the chance that Harley Westford carried the receipt with him, and that it perished with its owner. In that case, there is only one person who knows of the twenty thousand pounds—and that person is yourself. Can I trust you?”

“You have trusted me before.”

“Yes; and with important secrets, but never with such a secret as this. Will the gift of a thousand pounds, to be paid in ten instalments at intervals of six months—will such a gift as that buy your fidelity?”

“It will,” answered Jacob Danielson.

“Then I will execute any deed you choose to draw up, engaging myself to pay you that money. And, now, I want something more than your silence. I want your service.”

“ You shall have both.”

“ Good!” replied the banker. “ Now then, listen to what I have to say. . When Harley Westford deposited his fortune in my hands, he also deposited the title-deeds of a small estate in this county. Those deeds and that estate must be mine.”

“ But how so?”

“ By virtue of a deed executed by Harley Westford before his departure—a deed, giving me sole possession of the estate if a certain sum, lent by me to him, was not repaid within six months of the date of his signature.”

“ O, indeed! The estate will be yours by virtue of such a deed as that!”

“ Yes; a document formally drawn up by a lawyer, and signed by you as witness.”

“ But I never witnessed any such deed,” answered the clerk.

“ Your memory fails you to-night, my dear

Danielson; you will have a better memory tomorrow, especially if I give you fifty pounds on account of our bargain."

The banker said this with a sinister smile. The clerk fully understood him.

"Make it a hundred," he exclaimed, "and you will find that I have an excellent memory."

"So be it. And now I want you to try and remember if you have any friend—a lawyer's clerk, we'll say—who knows how to draw up a legal document in which there shall be no flaw, and who is also clever at imitating the handwriting of other people."

"Let me think a little before I answer that question," replied Danielson.

He sat for some minutes thinking deeply, with his sharp eyes fixed upon the fire.

"Yes," he said at last, "I do know such a man."

"And you will have the deed prepared and executed at once?"

“ I will. The man will want money for his work.”

“ He shall be paid handsomely,” answered the banker.

“ And how about the signature which he is to imitate ?”

Rupert Godwin took the stolen letter from his pocket, and tore off the Captain's autograph. This he handed to Jacob Danielson.

“ You understand what you have to do ?” he asked.

“ Perfectly.”

No more was said. The clerk's brains seemed no more affected by the wine that he had taken than if he had been drinking so much water. He sat looking, sometimes at the fire, sometimes at the thoughtful face of his employer ; and every now and then he refilled his glass from one of the decanters standing near him.

But, drink as deeply as he might, his mind

seemed entirely unaffected by what he drank. Rupert Godwin, watching him furtively even in the midst of his own reverie, perceived this.

“The man is made of iron,” he thought, as he went to his own room, after bidding Jacob Danielson good-night. “With many of my secrets in the possession of such a man as this, how can I ever know rest?”

And then, after a pause, he muttered :

“Rest!—rest! When have I ever rested since—”

Only a groan finished that broken sentence.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DAY OF DESOLATION.

BITTER, most bitter, was the anguish which awaited Violet and Lionel Westford when they returned from their pleasant little excursion to Winchester.

They had gone forth that morning in all the light-hearted carelessness of youth, pleased with the beauty of the fair world in which they lived, scarcely able to believe that sorrow, deep and lasting sorrow, could exist in so lovely a universe.

But now the blow, the first most cruel blow which crushes out the warm life of youth, had fallen.

Never again could these two bright young creatures feel as they had felt; never again could they almost doubt the existence of sorrow.

The cup of anguish was offered to their young lips—the bitter draught was to be drained to its uttermost dregs.

Violet found her mother lying once more on the bed to which she had been so long a prisoner. The doctor had attended her; but he could do nothing. The miserable woman lay in a stony stupor, with her face turned towards the wall. No passionate sob relieved the anguish of her aching heart. She suffered in silence. It seemed as if her heart was changed to stone.

The surgeon, who had known Violet and Lionel from their childhood, was waiting in the drawing-room, and begged to see them before he left the house. They went to him without delay, and found him seated near a table, with a newspaper in his hand.

“Mamma has had some bad news,” exclaimed Violet, whose face was wet with the tears she had shed at the aspect of her mother’s grief. “O, Mr. Sanderson, I am sure that it is so. This is no common illness. Some one has brought news, bad news, of papa. For pity’s sake, do not torture us by this agony of suspense; let us know the worst.”

“Yes,” said Lionel, with forced calmness, “let us know the worst.”

The surgeon looked at them with sad, compassionate eyes.

“Perhaps it is better so,” he said thoughtfully. “The news that has so affected your poor mother is not of a very certain nature,” he continued, “and may not be so bad as it seems. We can still hope for the best, Miss Westford. Providence is very merciful, and joy sometimes is near at hand when we are in the depths of despair.”

“Tell us the worst,” cried Lionel passionately; “you are trifling with us, Mr. Sanderson.”

The surgeon placed the newspaper in the young man’s hand.

“Read that,” he said, pointing to the marked paragraph respecting the Lily Queen; “and may God grant that it is only a false alarm!”

Lionel read the paragraph—not once only, but three separate times; and a deadly chill crept to his heart as he read. Presently he felt a little hand trembling on his shoulder. He turned and saw Violet’s white face staring blankly at the fatal newspaper.

“O, no; no, no!” she cried piteously; “not lost—not lost! My father—my dear, dear father!”

“Let us hope not, dear Miss Westford,” answered the surgeon, in the most cheering tones he could assume. “These business men are always very quick to take alarm. Let us trust,

my dear friends—let us trust in Heaven that all may be well.”

“No,” cried Lionel vehemently, “I will trust no longer. Something tells me that my father is lost. Can I forget my mother’s illness? That illness was caused solely by a presentiment that harm would come to my father upon this voyage. For twenty years she had been a sailor’s wife, yet never before had she felt such a presentiment of evil. I was a presumptuous fool, and I laughed at my mother’s fears. I know now that they were well founded. My father’s ship has been wrecked; she and all her crew have perished.”

The young man was interrupted by a hysterical shriek from Violet, who fell sobbing into his arms.

“You will kill your sister, if you talk like that, Mr. Lionel Westford,” exclaimed the doctor angrily.

Lionel was silent. He carried Violet to her

own room ; and that night Mr. Sanderson had to attend two patients at the Grange.

As for the young man himself, a terrible despair seemed to have fallen upon him. All through that long miserable night he paced up and down the empty rooms absorbed in melancholy thoughts.

“Why was I not a sailor like him?” he thought. “Why was I not with him in the hour of trial and danger? It might have been my fate to save him, or at the worst to perish with him! I feel myself a base coward when I think of my idle luxurious existence, and remember how my father has hazarded his life to earn the money I have been squandering at University wine-parties and boating excursions. And now that noble life has been lost in the last effort to increase the fortune of his children!”

Miserable and dreary were the days and weeks

that succeeded that fatal visit of Rupert Godwin to the Grange.

For a long time Clara Westford and her daughter lay in their darkened rooms, victims to a kind of low fever.

During this weary time Lionel was something more than an ordinary son and brother to the mother and sister he adored.

Night after night, when the hired nurses had grown weary of their task—when the servants of the household, sincerely as they were attached to their mistress and her daughter, had from mere exhaustion been compelled to abandon their watch, the devotion of the young man still sustained him. There was something wonderful in this patient self-abnegation in one who, until the day of calamity, had seemed so light-hearted and frivolous.

Lionel Westford's task was not confined to watching in the sick-room. He made many journeys to London during that weary time.

Again and again he visited every place where there was any hope of obtaining tidings of the missing vessel; but no good news rewarded his patience, and before the time of his mother's recovery he had learned the worst.

A fragment of the lost vessel had been found floating near a rocky coast—a fragment which bore the name of the Lily Queen.

With a broken heart Lionel Westford returned to the Grange. Bitter as this loss was to him, the thought of his mother's anguish was almost a deeper grief.

He returned to her, and watched once more by her sick-bed. This time he could watch and tend her day after day, night after night. He had no longer need to leave her, for he knew the worst.

At last, after the long intervals of stupor and delirium were past, Clara Westford was pronounced well enough to be removed from her bed to a chair near the fire.

The windows were closed. Without all was dark and dreary. The trees were leafless; and the December wind sighed mournfully amongst the bare branches. The sky was of a dull iron gray—no glimmer of sunshine relieved its coldness.

But Clara Westford's room was no comfortless apartment, even in the depth of winter. Voluminous curtains half shrouded the windows, and the invalid was propped up by pillows in a luxurious easy-chair, that had been wheeled close to the low fireplace of polished steel, in which the red flames were reflected with a cheerful dancing motion that was very pleasant to see. The broad marble mantelpiece was crowded with valuable Oriental china, rare old Japanese monsters, and curious specimens of crackle, brought home by the Captain for the gratification of the wife, to please whom had been the chief delight of his existence. A portrait of Harley Westford smiled with the sailor's own bright genial smile above the chimney-

piece ; and a tapestry screen, of Violet's workmanship, protected the invalid from the heat of the fire.

Clara had not been seated long in that comfortable chimney-corner when the door was opened, and Lionel came into the apartment, half-leading, half-carrying, his sister. Violet had also risen to-day from her sick-bed, but not for the first time. Her illness had not been quite so long nor so severe as that of her mother, and she had been the first to rise.

But she was still very feeble, and in her loose white robes she looked wan and phantom-like. She was no longer the brilliant sunny-haired girl who had fascinated the young painter at the Winchester ball.

"Violet," exclaimed Mrs. Westford, "how pale and changed you are! O, my darling girl, you too have been ill?"

"Yes, dear mother."

“And I was never told of your illness!” murmured Clara reproachfully.

“Why should you have been made more wretched by any such knowledge, dear mother?” said Lionel. “Violet has been taken care of.”

“Yes, indeed, dear Lionel,” exclaimed the girl, lifting her eyes with a grateful glance to her brother’s face; for she knew that during that bitter time Lionel had been the good genius of the household.

“My poor Violet,” murmured the mother, clasping her daughter’s hand with quiet tenderness,—“my poor Violet, the sunshine of life has been clouded very early for you. I have had twenty years of unsullied brightness, but for you the storm-cloud has come very soon. My poor children—my beloved children!”

The mother laid her weary head on her son’s shoulder. Lionel drew his arm round her with a caressing gesture. Violet had sunk upon a low

ottoman at her mother's feet ; and, grouped thus, the three were silent for some moments.

Lionel was pale as death. The dreaded question would be asked presently, and the answer must be given.

He wondered that his mother had not questioned him long before this.

Alas for her broken heart, the reason of her silence was her instinctive consciousness that all hope was past. If there had been joyful tidings, her son would have only too gladly imparted them. And then Clara Westford had watched the young man's face, and she had seen the traces of despair imprinted there only too plainly. She clasped the strong hand that was supporting her feeble frame.

"Lionel," she murmured, "why do you try to hide the truth from me? Do you think I cannot understand my children's looks, and read my sorrows in their sad faces? There is no news of your father!"

“No, mother; there is no news of—my father.”

“But there is news,” gasped Clara, “of his ship!”

“Only the saddest tidings,” exclaimed the young man, sinking on his knees beside his mother’s chair. “O, mother—mother! for our sakes try to endure this calamity. Look up, dear mother, and be comforted. Remember, *we have only you.*”

Those last words told all. Clara Westford knew that she was a widow.

CHAPTER IX.

A PITILESS CLAIMANT.

AFTER that sad scene in Mrs. Westford's bed-chamber, peace seemed to reign in the household of the Grange.

Bitter and profound was the grief felt by each member of that little household; but the heroic hearts battled bravely with their sorrow. Very little was said of the lost husband and father. Those who had so dearly loved him, who now so deeply lamented him, dared not speak that familiar name; but he reigned supreme in the thoughts of all.

In Clara Westford's bedchamber a black curtain hung before the sailor's portrait. Another

portrait in the drawing-room was also shrouded in the same manner.

Violet looked very pale and fragile in her deep mourning robes. Her golden hair gleamed with all its old brightness under the black crape bonnet; but there was a settled sadness in the dark blue eyes which had once beamed with such bewitching smiles.

Everyone in the neighbourhood of the Grange now knew that Harley Westford's ship had been lost, and many friends gathered round the widow to condole with her in the hour of her affliction.

But, alas, their presence only tortured her. She wanted to be alone—alone with her despair, alone with the image of her lost husband. If she had been of the old Catholic faith, she would have gladly fled to the quiet shelter of some convent; where the remainder of her joyless days might have been devoted to charitable works and pious

meditations, and where no sound of the clamorous outer world might have reached her weary ears.

She endured her grief in silence, but the anguish was not the less keen. The thought of her loss was ever present to her—not to be put aside even for a moment. She spent days in wandering listlessly from room to room, recalling the happy hours which had been spent with *him* in each familiar chamber. Everything reminded her of him, every association was torture. Even the society of her children afforded no consolation to her. Their burden was not like hers, she said to herself. The future might bring them new hope; for her all hope, all joy, was buried with the past.

Amongst the friends who came to the Grange was a Mr. Maldon, a retired attorney, who had made a large fortune in Chancery practice, and

who was a person of some importance in the neighbourhood.

This gentleman questioned Clara about her husband's property. What proceedings was she about to take? What was the extent of her children's fortune?

Then Clara related to him Rupert Godwin's extraordinary statement about the money advanced by him to Harley Westford, and the title-deeds lodged in his hands as a security for that loan.

"Strange!" exclaimed Mr. Maldon. "I always thought your husband had saved a comfortable little fortune."

"I thought the same," answered Clara, "and I think so still. Upon the day of his departure my dear husband told me he was about to deposit a sum of twenty thousand pounds in the hands of Rupert Godwin."

"And Mr. Godwin denies having received that money?"

“He does; and he further declares my husband to be his debtor. But I will never believe it, unless I see the proof in Harley’s own handwriting.”

“My dear Mrs. Westford, this is all very mysterious,” exclaimed the lawyer. “I don’t see how we can possibly doubt such a man as Mr. Godwin. His position is that of one of the commercial princes of this country. He would not be likely to advance any false assertion with regard to his claims upon your husband.”

“I do not know that. I have a very bad opinion of Rupert Godwin,” Mrs. Westford answered coldly.

“You know him, then?”

“I knew him once, very long ago; and I knew him then to be one of the meanest and worst of men.”

The lawyer looked at Clara with a bewildered

stare. "That is very strong language, my dear Mrs. Westford."

"This matter is one upon which I feel very strongly. I believe that my husband lodged twenty thousand pounds in Rupert Godwin's hands; and I believe also that Rupert Godwin is quite capable of cheating myself and my children out of that money."

"Well, well, my dear Mrs. Westford," exclaimed the bewildered attorney, "I think you allow your prejudices to mislead you in this matter. But in any case, I will make it my business to go up to town and see Mr. Godwin immediately. You shall be protected from any attempted wrong. I liked and respected your husband. I love and admire yourself and your children. And you shall not be cheated. No, no, you shall not be cheated; old Stephen Maldon must indeed be changed, if he can be done by the sharpest banker in London."

The lawyer lost no time in paying a visit to the City, where he had a long interview with Rupert Godwin. The result of that interview was that the banker showed Stephen Maldon a deed signed by Harley Westford, and duly witnessed by Jacob Danielson, and by John Spence, a lawyer's clerk. The document bore the date of June 26th, in the previous year.

This deed gave Rupert Godwin full power to take possession of the Grange estate, pictures, plate, furniture, and all appertaining to house and homestead, on or after the 25th of March in the present year, unless the sum of six thousand five hundred pounds was paid to him in the interim.

It was now late in January. For only two months more would the widow and orphans be secure in their once happy home.

Mr. Maldon was a very clever lawyer; but he could see nothing in the deed shown him by

Rupert Godwin that would justify any dispute of the banker's claim.

The catastrophe seemed very terrible, but none the less inevitable because it was a hard thing for the widow and orphans. The law does not take widows and orphans into any special consideration. The estate must be abandoned to Mr. Godwin, unless the six thousand five hundred pounds could be paid on or before the ensuing quarter-day.

Mr. Maldon searched amongst the Captain's papers at the Grange, but he could not find any document calculated to throw the smallest light on the sailor's affairs. He called upon the Winchester attorney who had made Captain Westford's will, and carefully studied the wording of that document.

The will left all property, real and personal, to Clara, who was appointed sole executrix. But the will was dated a year earlier than the deed in the possession of Mr. Godwin, and there was no

evidence that the sailor was possessed of any property, except his Hampshire estate, when he sailed on his fatal voyage.

The lawyer knew that men have often deceived their wives as to their pecuniary position. Might not Harley Westford have invented that story of the twenty thousand pounds, in order to lull those he loved with a false sense of peace and security?

“A generous, impulsive sailor would be the worst possible man of business,” thought Stephen Maldon. “What more likely than that Harley Westford was a ruined man, while all the world fancied him a rich one?”

Meanwhile, the weeks sped by. Soon, very soon, the 25th of March would be at hand.

Clara Westford knew full well that she must expect no mercy from Rupert Godwin.

The heroism of her nature asserted itself, and she prepared herself, with calm resignation, to leave

the home where she had been so unspeakably happy.

She had no money of her own—positively none ; for she had fled from her father's roof to become the wife of Harley Westford, and had been disinherited by him in favour of a grandchild, the daughter of an only son, who died at two-and-twenty years of age, leaving a baby girl, on whom stern Sir John Ponsonby doated with senile fondness.

Never had the sailor heard a hint or a whisper of that cruel slander which had blighted Clara Ponsonby's youth—never had he heard the association of her name with that of the notorious young roué, Rupert Godwin.

From the moment of her marriage, Sir John Ponsonby's daughter disappeared entirely from the circles in which she had been once a star of some magnitude.

She had gone to her husband penniless, and he

had loved her more fondly than if she had been dowered with a million.

Now, when she examined into the state of her affairs, now that she was widowed and alone, and had no longer Harley's strong arm to lean upon, she found that her circumstances were indeed desperate.

The yearly bills of the tradespeople who supplied the Grange were all unpaid, and amounted to some hundreds. The servants' wages must also be paid; and to meet these claims Clara Westford had no money whatever.

The little stock of ready-money which her husband had left with her was entirely spent. He had promised to send his wife remittances from time to time, as it had been his habit to do; but he, and any money he possessed, had gone down to the fathomless depths of the ocean with the good ship Lily Queen and all on board her.

Only one resource remained to the widow.

Her jewels, the costly gifts of a generous husband, these alone remained, and these must be sold in order that the tradespeople and servants might be paid.

There was a bitter pain in parting with these trinkets, every one of which had a tender association of its own.

But Clara Westford bore this sharp pain with quiet resignation. She arranged her jewel-box, and delivered it to her old friend, Mr. Maldon, with instructions for the sale of the jewels at some London auction-room. They were sold, amongst others, at Debenham and Storr's, as the property of "a lady, going abroad."

She was, indeed, going abroad—abroad into a world that to her inexperienced steps must needs be a trackless wilderness, full of pitiless thorns and brambles.

The valuables thus disposed of realised about four hundred pounds. With this sum Mrs. West-

ford discharged every claim upon her ; leaving a balance of some thirty pounds.

Thirty pounds ! And with this pitiful sum the widow and orphans, who had never known what it was to have a wish unfulfilled that money could gratify, were to begin the battle of life !

CHAPTER X.

HIDDEN IN THE YEW-TREE.

IT was the eve of the 25th of March—that day whose approach had been so dreaded by Clara Westford and her children,—the day on which they were to be banished for ever from their happy home.

As yet the banker had given no notice of his intentions with regard to his victims ; but Clara knew how little mercy she had to expect from him, and she had determined on saving herself and her children the agony of humiliation.

She would not wait for Rupert Godwin to act. She would not be turned out of her happy home by the man whose blighting influence had darkened her youth. She determined, therefore, to

leave the Grange early on the morning of the 25th.

But when she announced this determination to Violet, the girl expressed considerable surprise.

“Why should we be in such a hurry to leave the dear old place?” Violet exclaimed. “This Mr. Godwin may not press his claim upon the Grange. They say he is enormously rich, and surely he would be happy to let us stay here till he has a tenant for the place. We may be allowed to live here for some time to come, dear mother, till you are better and stronger, and more fit to face the world.”

Mrs. Westford shook her head.

“No, Violet,” she answered firmly; “I will not remain one hour under this roof when it becomes the property of Rupert Godwin.”

“Mamma, you speak as if you knew this Mr. Godwin?”

“I know that he is one of the vilest of men,”

answered Mrs. Westford. "Do not question me further, Violet; my resolution is not to be shaken upon this point. Believe me when I assure you that I am acting for the best. And now, write to your brother, dear, and ask him to meet us at the Waterloo Terminus to-morrow at one o'clock."

Lionel had been in London for the last few weeks, endeavouring to obtain a situation in some office.

But the young man, highly educated though he was, found it extremely difficult to procure any kind of employment, however humble.

His University education availed him little. London seemed to swarm with clever young men, all engaged in the struggle for daily bread. Lionel Westford's heart sank within him as he made application after application, only to fail alike in all.

For every situation that offered there seemed

a hundred competitors. And ninety-nine out of this hundred must endure the misery of failure.

Lionel had secured a very cheap and humble lodging on the Surrey side of the Thames, and had made arrangements for the reception of his mother and sister as soon as they left the Grange.

O, what a dreary change was that darksome London lodging, after the luxurious country-house, the lovely gardens, the horses and grooms, the dogs and guns, and all those things which are so especially dear to a young man !

On his own account, however, Lionel Westford never once complained. His only thought was of his mother and sister ; his most earnest desire that he might be enabled to shield *them* from all the bitterest ills of poverty.

He thought very seriously of his future career. His classical learning seemed unlikely to be of the smallest use to him ; unless, like Goldsmith and Johnson, he accepted the slavery of a school-

master's drudge. How bitterly he regretted his careless youth, his want of a profession, which would give him at least something! He asked himself whether there was yet time for him to adopt a profession. There was the Church. Yes; but he must waste two or three years before he could hope for a curacy worth from fifty to a hundred per annum. There was the law; but, alas, he was too familiar with the proverbial miseries of briefless youth idling in the garrets of the Temple.

It was a living he wanted, an immediate living, and in search of this he tramped the streets of London with untiring feet; but day by day went by, and he seemed no nearer to the object of his desire.

The afternoon of the 24th of March was dull and cheerless. The wind howled among the branches of the old trees about the Grange; the gray sky was cold and sunless.

Yet upon this afternoon, cheerless and cold though it was, Violet Westford opened the little garden-gate leading out into the forest, for the first time for many months.

Never since her illness had she seen or heard of the artist, George Stanmore.

She had fully expected that he would have come to the Grange to inquire about her during that long illness; and she had contrived to ask Lionel, in an apparently careless manner, if he had heard anything of his friend Mr. Stanmore.

But the answer had been in the negative. George had therefore taken no steps to discover the cause of Violet's absence from her favourite forest-haunts. This seeming neglect and indifference had cruelly stung the girl's heart.

"His pretended attachment to me was only a passing fancy, perhaps," she thought; "and I daresay he was amused by my sentimental folly in believing all his protestations of regard. I can

understand now why he shrank from seeing my mother and making an open avowal of his love."

The idea that she had been the dupe of a sentimental delusion was very bitter to the girl's sensitive mind. Her pride was outraged, and from the time of her recovery she had shunned the forest pathways, with an obstinate determination to avoid all meetings with her false lover.

But now that she was going to leave the Grange for ever, an irresistible impulse took possession of her, and she felt that she could not quit the neighbourhood of the forest without making some endeavour to ascertain the cause of George Stanmore's neglect.

Might not he, too, have been ill? Or might he not have been compelled to leave the forest? It was almost easier to believe anything than that he could be false.

Thus it was that Miss Westford's love overcame her pride; and once more she opened the

little gate leading to her beloved woodland,—the sweet scene which had been familiar and dear to her from infancy.

The forest pathways looked dreary this cold March afternoon ; but the change in the aspect of the woodland was not so striking as the change in her who now passed through that rustic gateway.

The brilliant girl, whose smiling face was once like the sunlight, looked now wan and pale as some misty shape that glides about the mountaintops in the evening dimness.

She walked with feeble steps along the grassy path, for the beating of her heart seemed to paralyse her strength. She went straight to the cottage where the landscape-painter had lodged ; but the walk was a long one, and the twilight was gathering fast when she reached the modest little habitation, nestling amongst grand old trees.

The firelight from the cottage window streamed out upon the chill gray twilight, and there was a

look of homeliness and comfort in the aspect of the simple place.

A sudden pang pierced through Violet's heart as she looked at that cosy little cottage, with the neat well-stocked garden, and the red firelight in the window.

“If my mother and I had such a home as that, we might think ourselves very happy,” she thought; “and yet I daresay the people who live here have often envied our wealth and luxury.”

A woman was standing at the open door of the cottage as Violet approached the gate, and she came out into the pathway to welcome her visitor.

“Lor, Miss Westford!” she exclaimed, “you a'most frightened me, standing there so dark and ghostly like. Do step in, miss, and rest yourself a bit by the fire. It's quite chilly these March afternoons. How sad it do seem to see your black dress, and to think of the poor dear kind free-spoken gentleman that's gone! Ah, deary me,

deary me, he were a good friend to all us poor folks, and there's many will miss him in these parts. Take a chair close to the fire, miss. I am so glad to see you getting about once more, though you're looking but sadly yet. I was at the Grange many times to ask after you during your illness."

Violet's heart beat convulsively. She began to think that George Stanmore had employed this woman as his messenger.

"It was very good of you to inquire after me," she faltered.

"Lor, miss! wasn't it likely I should be wishful to know how you was? Haven't I known you ever since you was a little bit of a child? and hasn't your dear ma been a good friend to me times and often? and didn't your pa send me a bottle of his own old East-Indy Madeery, last Christmas was a twelvemonth, when he heard I was ailing?"

In all this there was no mention of Mr. Stan-

more. Violet's heart sank. She could not bring herself to question the simple dame, and she was not sufficiently skilled in diplomacy to extort the information she was so eager to obtain without direct questioning. She looked hopelessly round the comfortable little cottage chamber, wondering what she could say next. She was very pale; but the red light of the fire gave a false glow to her face, and the good-natured cottager did not perceive her visitor's agitation.

"How neatly you keep your cottage, Mrs. Morris!" Violet said at last, feeling that she must say something. "It's quite pleasant to see your place, it looks such a picture of comfort."

"You're very good to say so, miss, I'm sure," answered Mrs. Morris. "But talking of pictures, and talking of comfort, we ain't half as comfortable now, since we've lost our lodger."

Violet's heart gave a great bound. He was gone then! But how—and where?

“You’ve lost your lodger?” she said. “You mean Mr. Stanmore?”

“Yes, miss. Mr. Stanmore, that painter gentleman. He left us all of a sudden, the very first week as you was taken ill; and, what’s more, it was against his own wishes as he went.”

“Against his own wishes! How so?”

“Why, you see, miss, this is how it was. I was ironing in that window one afternoon, when I saw a dark foreign-looking gentleman standing at our gate, and with such a frown upon his face that he set me all of a tremble like, which I scorched one of my good man’s shirt-fronts as brown as a coffee-berry for the first time this ten years, having had an aunt, Rebecca Javes by name, which was brought up to the clear-starching and laundry-maid at Sir Robert Flinder’s, three miles on this side of Netley Abbey, and has shown me to iron a shirt-front with her own hands more times than I could count—”

“ But the foreign-looking gentleman—”

“ Yes, miss. That’s just what I was a-saying. There he stands as large as life. In he walks, right into our place, as cool as you please. ‘ Is my son at home?’ he asks. ‘ Your son, sir!’ I answered. ‘ Lor, bless me, no; I don’t know any such person.’ ‘ O yes you do,’ he says. ‘ The person who painted that picture yonder is my son, and he lodges in your house.’ With that he points to one of Mr. Stanmore’s landscapes that’s been set to dry on my little table yonder. ‘ Mr. Stanmore your son!’ I cried out. And I assure you, miss, you might have knocked me down with a feather. ‘ He is capable of calling himself Stanmore, or any other false name,’ answered the dark gentleman; ‘ but whatever he calls himself, the man who painted that picture is my wicked and undutiful son.’

“ Before he could get out another word Mr. Stanmore walked in, with his hat on, and his

drawings and things under his arm. He'd just come in from the forest.

“‘I am here, father,’ he said, ‘to answer for my sins, whatever they may be;’ and he said it as proud-like as if he'd been a prince of the royal family.

“So then the two gentlemen walked upstairs to Mr. Stanmore's sitting-room, and our walls being thin, you know, miss, I could hear a good deal of what was said; not the words exactly, but the tones of voice like, though I'm sure as to be-mean myself by listening, I wouldn't do it, there, not if you was to lay me down twenty pound; and I could hear as the two gentlemen seemed at variance, as you may say; and at last down comes Mr. Stanmore's father, as stiff as a poker, and as black as any thunderstorm as *I* ever see, and walks out of the house without so much as a word to me; but I could see by his face that he was regularly upset. And then, about an hour or so

afterwards, down came Mr. Stanmore, looking very pale, but very quiet-like. He'd packed all his things, he said, and he wanted my husband to carry them over to Winchester Station in his cart, in time for the mail-train, which he did. I was regular cut up at the young gentleman leaving me so sudden like, for never was there a better lodger, and he paid me very handsome, and was altogether the gentleman. He seemed quite broken-hearted like at going away, miss ; and, lor bless me, if that don't remind me of something !"

The dame stopped suddenly, looking at Violet.

"Something about you, too, miss !"

The blood rushed into Violet's pale face.

"Did Mr. Stanmore mention me ?" she asked.

"Yes, miss ; indeed he did. Just as he was going out of the house he stopped all of a sudden, and said, ' If you should see Miss Westford, tell her that I have painted the old yew-tree she was so fond of ; and I want her to look once more at

the tree, in order that she may remember it when she sees my picture.' Wasn't that a funny message, miss?"

"Yes," Violet answered, with pretended carelessness. "I suppose Mr. Stanmore means an old yew near the lake, which my brother and I very much admired. I sha'n't have many opportunities of looking at the tree, Mrs. Morris, for we are going to leave this neighbourhood to-morrow."

The woman expressed her regret at the departure of Violet and her mother; but, in the country, news travels fast, and she had heard some days before that the Grange was to be deserted. The change of fortune that had befallen the Westfords had been talked of and lamented by rich and poor.

Violet left the cottage with a heavy heart. George Stanmore had gone, leaving no trace behind him—not even a letter for the woman he had sworn to love and cherish for ever.

It was all a mystery, which Violet strove in vain to understand.

The moon had risen when she left the cottage, and every branch and leaf stood sharply out against the silvery light. Violet looked at the peaceful scene with inexpressible sadness.

“It may be the last time that I shall ever see it,” she thought; “the last time! And I have been so happy here!”

Then she thought of George Stanmore’s message about the old yew-tree.

It seemed a very absurd and meaningless message—a message which to anyone not in love would have appeared the very extreme of maudlin sentimentality. But Violet was by no means inclined to regard it in that light. She looked upon it rather as a solemn and mysterious mandate which it was her duty to obey to the very letter.

Madame Laffarge, of unpleasant notoriety, wrote to her husband entreating him to eat certain cakes

made by her own fair hand, and to contemplate the moon at a certain hour, when she too would be absorbed in sentimental meditation upon that luminary. The idea was poetical, but, unfortunately for M. Laffarge, the cakes were poisoned, and he died, the victim of obedience.

Violet was in that state of mind in which she found it pleasanter to loiter in the forest than to go home, and there was a kind of consolation in the idea of doing anything that her lover had asked her to do. It seemed to bring him nearer to her for the moment. He might be thinking of that favourite spot at the very moment she stood there thinking so sadly of him. He might even see her in her loneliness and despondency by some subtle power of second-sight given to lovers. Was anything impossible to true love?

So Miss Westford turned aside from her homeward path, and went fearlessly through the solitary avenue that led towards the lake.

That forest lake looked very lovely under the still evening sky. The broad branches of the yew made patches of black shadow on the grass; the fallen leaves made a faint rustling noise as the wind stirred them—a kind of ghostly murmur.

Around the trunk of the tree there was a rustic bench of roughly-hewn wood; and on this Violet seated herself, exhausted by her long walk, and glad to linger on a spot so associated with her lost happiness.

As she sat there, the beauty of the scene impressed her with an almost painful sense of its splendour. For the first time throughout that sorrowful day the tears, passionate tears of regret, rushed down her pale cheeks.

She turned her head aside, and rested her forehead against the rugged bark of the yew.

As she did so, she perceived a hollow in the tree—a great hollow, in which George Stanmore had often hidden his colour-box and brushes. The re-

membrance of this suddenly flashed upon her. It had been her lover's habit to hide things in that old tree. What if he had hidden a letter there, and had directed her attention to the fact by means of that message left with Mrs. Morris! In the next moment Violet Westford was on her knees before the hollow, groping in it with her hands.

She found it half-filled with moss and withered leaves; but, after dragging these out, she saw something white gleaming in the moonlight.

Ah, how eagerly she picked up that scrap of white from among the scattered leaves and moss!

It was a letter. Miss Westford could just make out the words "For Violet," written on the envelope. Impatient as she was to see the contents of that precious envelope, she was fain to wait until she reached home; for brightly as the moon shone above forest and lake, that poetic radiance was not sufficient to throw light upon

the mysteries of a modern gentleman's penmanship.

Never in her happiest day had Violet Westford's feet tripped more lightly along those forest pathways. She reached the Grange panting and exhausted, took a candle from the hall, and hurried to her own apartment—the bright, airy room, so prettily decked to suit her girlish tastes, so soon to pass into the hands of strangers.

She seated herself close to the light, and tore open George Stanmore's envelope. The letter it contained was brief, and had evidently been written in extreme haste.

It consisted of only these words :

“MY DEAREST GIRL,—Circumstances which I cannot explain in this letter compel me to leave England immediately. I do not know when I may be able to return ; but when I do return, it will be to claim you as my wife. In the mean time, I implore you to write to me at the Post-office, Bruges,

Belgium. Write to me, dearest, and tell me that you do not doubt my fidelity; tell me also that your faith will be as constant and unshaken as that of your devoted

GEORGE."

No words can express the comfort which Violet Westford derived from this brief letter. To a woman of the world, George Stanmore's assurance of unalterable affection might have seemed of very little value; but to this girl, who did not know what it was to deceive, that assurance was all in all.

"He loves me! He is true to me!" she exclaimed, clasping her hands in a rapture of delight. "And when he comes back, it will be to seek me as his wife. But what will he do when he finds the Grange deserted, and our circumstances so cruelly changed? Will he change too?" This was the question which Violet asked herself very sadly, as she sat in the familiar room that was so soon to be hers no longer.

There was little sleep or rest for the dwellers in that pleasant country-house during the last sad night. The servants sat late in the cosy house-keeper's room, bewailing the misfortunes of their mistress over a very comfortably-furnished supper-table—for even a funeral table must be provided with “baked meats;” and faithful retainers, weighed down by the sadness of approaching farewell, required to be sustained by extra beer. They were unanimous in their praises of the family they had served so long, and in their dread of the unknown ills to be encountered in strange households, and from masters and mistresses whose “ways” would be new to them. But the old-fashioned type of servant, who appears so frequently in Morton's comedies and in old novels, seems to be almost as extinct as the dodo. The Grange retainers were honestly sorry for Mrs. Westford's misfortunes, but they had no idea of volunteering to follow the family in exile and

poverty without wages, and, if need were, without food. Nor did cook or housemaid rush into the parlour to lay her savings at the feet of mistress, in the pathetic manner so familiar in the fairy world of romance. They sighed over the sorrows of the house as they ate their cold meat, and shook their heads dolefully over the old housekeeper's famous pickles; but their boxes were all packed, and their plans all made for an early departure from the ruined house.

All through that long dreary night Mrs. Westford sat at her desk, sorting and destroying old letters and documents, the records of her happy womanhood. Of all the friendly notes, the pleasant gossiping letters, she kept none, except those written by her husband and her children.

Ah, how happy she had been in that simple country-house! What a calm life it had been!—and how brief the years seemed as she looked back to the early days in which her husband had

brought her into Hampshire house-hunting, in a happy summer holiday, when their honeymoon was scarcely waned, and there was still in the minds of both the sweet strange sense that it was a new thing to be thus together!

She remembered her first year in that quiet haven. The glorious summer time, in which every sunny day had brought the discovery of some new treasure in shrubbery or garden. She remembered the warm midsummer night, in which she had lain, faint and weak, but unspeakably happy, looking up at the stars, with the perfumed air of the June night blowing in upon her from the wide window, and her baby Lionel on her breast.

CHAPTER XI.

HOMELESS AND FRIENDLESS.

VERY early in the chill spring morning Violet and her mother drove away from the Grange in a hired fly that was to convey them to Winchester.

They took nothing with them but their own personal property, and the two portraits of Harley Westford. These Mrs. Westford knew she had no legal right to possess, but she stooped to infringe the letter of the law rather than leave her dead husband's likeness in the hands of his hateful rival.

Thus it was that the widow and her daughter left their happy home, with all its luxurious belongings undisturbed, to fall into the hands of strangers.

It was still early when they reached Winchester; and it was just one o'clock when the train entered the Waterloo Terminus, where Lionel Westford was waiting on the platform, very pale and very grave, and altogether different from the light-hearted, careless young Oxonian who had brought life and gaiety to his home whenever he had come to it, and whose greatest trouble was the fear of being disappointed in his hope of University honours.

The young man bore his reverses nobly. He greeted his mother and sister with one of his old smiles, and then ran off to attend to their luggage, which he saw conveyed to a cab.

In this cab they speedily drove away from the station, and went through two or three small streets in the neighbourhood of the Waterloo-road.

The cab stopped at a shabby but clean-looking house in one of the smallest of these streets.

Lionel Westford watched his mother's face with an anxious expression. He was thinking how horrible this dingy street, that shabby, poverty-stricken house must appear, when contrasted with the dear old Grange, and its lovely lawns and flower-beds, its avenue of stately elms, and spreading meadows sheltered with old oaks and beeches.

"It is very poor, very common, dear mother," said the young man; "but the landlady seems a decent sort of person, and this place was the best I could get at present. However, this time of poverty and trial shall not last long, if any effort of mine can shorten it."

He pressed his mother's hand as he spoke, and she answered him by a look of the deepest gratitude and affection.

"My treasures!" she exclaimed, looking fondly at her two children, "should I not be a wretch to repine while you are still left to me?"

Lionel had done all in his power to impart an

appearance of cheerfulness to the shabby sitting-room which had been prepared for the new-comers. A fire burned in the little grate ; a bunch of early spring-flowers adorned the table.

Only true and pure affection supported the banker's victims during these first days of poverty and trial.

The trial was very bitter ; for poverty was new to them, and everything around seemed to send a fresh chill to their hearts.

But they were none of them people to waste time in idle complaints. Every morning, as soon as he had eaten his frugal breakfast, Lionel Westford set out upon his weary travels in the great desert of London.

What desert can be more lonely than that wealthy and crowded city to the wanderer who has neither friends nor money ?

Every morning Violet and her mother also left their dingy lodgings, and went out into the world

by separate ways to seek for bread. Yes, for bread! For now only a very slender hoard remained between them and absolute starvation.

Violet was no more fortunate than her brother. She was accomplished; but there were many portionless girls in London, all more or less accomplished, and all eager to earn the merest pittance. Who could hope that there would ever be enough employment for all of them?

Mrs. Westford also sought to turn her talents to some use; but she too sought for a long time most vainly. She offered herself as a morning governess, and spent what to her was a large sum in the postage of letters replying to advertisements in the morning-papers. But no answers came to these letters. Education seemed to have become the most valueless drug in the London market. The Captain's widow was troubled by none of those ultra-refined compunctions which restrain the actions of some among the ranks of the

shabby-genteel. When she found her educational powers would not obtain her the merest pittance, she fell back upon her mechanical skill in all kinds of elegant fancy-work. She visited half the Berlin-wool shops and fancy repositories in London and the suburbs, and at last succeeded in finding a speculative trader, who agreed to give her a starvation price for her work.

At last, however, when a kind of heart-sickness had seized upon both mother and daughter, a faint glimmer of sunshine broke through the dense black clouds that darkened the horizon. It was only a chilly April radiance at best, but still it was the sun.

Violet was amongst the crowd of clever and accomplished women who answered an advertisement inserted in the *Times* by a lady who required a morning governess for her young daughters—two pretty-looking, half-educated girls of seventeen and nineteen.

Mrs. Montague Trevor was a frivolous woman, whose heart and intellect were alike absorbed in the delights of the fashionable world. She had been a beauty, and had flourished for her brief hour as belle of a second-rate watering-place, where she had been fortunate enough to win the affections of a popular Queen's Counsel, who fell in love with her pretty face, and was too busy ever to have leisure in which to find out how empty the head was behind it. Mr. Montague Trevor had therefore been very well content with his choice, and in due course had worked himself to death, leaving the watering-place beauty a widow with a handsome fortune. On the strength of this fortune, and her late husband's professional celebrity, Mrs. Trevor had obtained an extended circle of acquaintance, and amongst these she still played off some of the airs and graces which she had cultivated as a belle of nineteen.

She was intensely vain ; and she fancied that

every man who paid her a compliment was desperately in love with her. She had no disinclination to part with her freedom to a new lord and master; but she wanted a rich husband, for her habits were terribly extravagant, and, in spite of her excellent income, she was always more or less in debt.

Unfortunately, though her admirers were numerous, they were not many of them rich, and the vain and frivolous Annabella sighed in vain for a wealthy husband, whose boundless purse should supply money for all her whims and fancies.

It was this lady whose advertisement Violet Westford saw in the *Times* newspaper, and it was in Mrs. Trevor's fashionably-furnished drawing-room in the Regent's Park that the young girl sat amongst a crowd of other applicants, waiting the nervous moment when she should be summoned before the lady who was to decide her fate.

She knew that poverty, dire and terrible, was

fast approaching that miserable lodging near the Waterloo-road, and she felt a painful anxiety to be of some use to her mother, and to her brave young brother, on whose brow she already saw the impress of despair.

At last the moment arrived, and a smartly-dressed maid conducted Violet to Mrs. Trevor's morning-room, or boudoir, as it was always called by elegant Annabella.

Mrs. Trevor was reclining on a sofa, dressed in an elaborately beflounced muslin morning-dress, dotted about with infantine bows of sky-blue ribbon, her hair arranged *à la vierge*, an expensive fan in her hand, and a tiny Maltese dog in her lap. On a table near her there was a scent-bottle with a gold stopper, and an elegant little Dresden chocolate-service. The two Miss Trevors were lounging near the windows, and staring idly out into the Park.

As Violet entered the room, nervously anxi-

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ous, Mrs. Trevor uttered an exclamation of surprise.

“What a sweet face!” she cried. “My dear Theodosia, my darling Anastasia, did you ever see a sweeter face?”

Violet had no idea that this speech could possibly apply to her. She stood opposite the fine lady on the sofa, almost trembling with anxiety, for repeated failure had depressed her spirits, and she had a morbid apprehension of disappointment.

“You were so good as to send for me, madam,” she faltered.

“Yes, my love; I sent for you, and I am absolutely charmed with you. I like to see everything lovely about me—my rooms, my flowers, my china; and you are lovely! Beauty is almost as necessary to me as the air I breathe, and you are beautiful! I am sure we shall suit each other delightfully. Such *objects*, such *creatures*, such absolute Gorgons as I have seen this morning, my

dear!—really enough to give a sensitive person the horrors; and I am so excruciatingly sensitive.—Anastasia, my love, don't you think there is something of a likeness between Miss—Miss—”

“ Westford, madam,” interposed Violet.

“ Between Miss Westford and me? About the nose, Anastasia? Miss Westford has exactly that delicate style of nose which your poor papa used to call a perfect Grecian.”

Miss Anastasia Trevor did not take the trouble to answer her mother's question. Nor was there any occasion that she should do so, as the volatile Annabella rarely gave any one time to reply to her remarks.

“ I am sure you will suit me, my love!” she exclaimed. “ You play and sing, of course?”

“ O yes, madam.”

Mrs. Trevor waved her jewelled hand towards an open piano.

“ Let me hear you, my dear.”

Violet seated herself, and after a brilliant prelude, which displayed her execution and expression as a pianiste, she sang a simple little Italian barcarole, in which her mezzo-soprano voice rang out soft and clear.

“Charming!” exclaimed Mrs. Trevor. “You draw and paint in water-colours, I suppose?”

Violet blushed as she answered this question, for she remembered how her artist-lover had admired her sketches, and how much her taste had been cultivated in his society.

She opened a little portfolio which she had brought with her, and showed Mrs. Trevor some water-colour sketches of the forest.

“Delicious!” exclaimed the fashionable widow. “There is a taste, a lightness, a warmth, an atmosphere, a *chiaro-oscuro* which is really charming. You speak French, German, and Italian, of course, as those were mentioned as requisite in the advertisement?”

Violet replied that she was familiar with all three languages.

“And your references are irreproachable, I conclude?”

“I can refer you to Mr. Morton, the clergyman of the parish in which we lived in my dear father’s lifetime.”

Violet’s eyes filled with tears as she referred to that happy past, which contrasted so cruelly with the present.

“Nothing can be more satisfactory,” said Mrs. Trevor, as Violet handed her the address of the Hampshire rector. “I shall write to this gentleman by to-day’s post. I take it for granted that the answer will be favourable, therefore we may as well conclude arrangements at once. This is Wednesday. On Friday I can receive the rector’s answer, and on Monday morning you can commence your duties. Good-morning.—Anastasia, my love, the bell.”

Violet rose ; but she lingered hesitatingly.

“There is one question,” she murmured; “the salary, madam?”

“Ah, to be sure!” exclaimed Mrs. Trevor. “What a forgetful creature I am! You will want a salary, I suppose—though really, as it is your first engagement as a governess, there are many people who would object to giving you a salary. However, I am not one of those illiberal persons.—You know, Anastasia, your poor dear papa used to call me ridiculously generous.—The salary, Miss Westford, will be half-a-guinea a week.”

Violet had expected a great deal more ; but poverty stared her in the face, and even this pittance would be something.

“And the hours?” she asked.

“The hours will be from nine till two, which will enable you to dine comfortably at home with your own family,” Mrs. Trevor answered, with a benevolent smile.

From nine till two—six days a week—for half-a-guinea! Fourpence an hour was the value set upon accomplishments the acquirement of which had cost a small fortune!

Violet sighed as she thought of her expensive masters, her handsomely-paid governess, and the time and trouble which had been bestowed upon her education.

“Perhaps the situation will not suit you?” said the sweet Mrs. Trevor rather sharply.

“O, yes, madam; it will suit me very well.”

“And you accept the terms?”

“Yes, madam.”

“Then in that case I shall expect you on Monday. You can then begin your duties; that is, of course, in the event of the reference proving satisfactory.”

“I do not fear that, madam. Good-morning.”

And Violet left the richly-furnished boudoir comparatively happy; for half-a-guinea a week

was at least some small provision against absolute starvation.

Half-a-guinea a week for the salary of an accomplished governess! And this from Mrs. Montague Trevor, who thought nothing of paying a five-pound note for a cup and saucer of Sèvres china.

As the door closed upon Violet the diplomatic widow turned with a look of triumph to her eldest daughter.

“Well, I think I managed that business admirably!” she exclaimed. “Half-a-guinea a week! Why, my dear Anastasia, the girl is worth a hundred guineas a year at the very least. Look at the salary that elderly Gorgon with the blue spectacles had the presumption to ask me. This girl is worth as much again as the Gorgon, whose voice was like a screech owl’s.”

The younger Miss Trevor, who bore no resemblance to her mother either in person or disposi-

tion, lifted her eyes reproachfully to the flighty widow's face.

“But if this young lady is worth so much, is it not very cruel, and almost dishonest, to offer her so little, mamma?” she asked gravely.

“Cruel! dishonest!” ejaculated Mrs. Trevor.
“Why, child, you're a perfect idiot! You'll never make a bargain as long as you live.”

CHAPTER XII.

MATERNAL MANŒUVRES.

FIVE minutes before the clocks in the neighbourhood struck nine, on the appointed Monday morning Violet Westford knocked at the door of the villa in the Regent's Park. She was admitted by a maid-servant, who at once conducted her to an apartment near the top of the house—a cold, cheerless-looking room, very shabbily furnished, and commanding an agreeable view of the backs of the houses in Albany-street,—altogether a very different apartment from Mrs. Montague Trevor's silken-curtained boudoir, with its somewhat stagey decoration in modern buhl and marqueterie.

Here Violet's duties began; and very tedious

they promised to be ; for one of her pupils was idle, frivolous, and flippan't, and the other was naturally slow of apprehension.

Anastasia Trevor was a clever girl ; but her natural idleness was excessive, and she could only be induced to study those accomplishments which could be paraded before the admiring or curious eyes of her acquaintance.

Theodosia was not a clever or brilliant girl ; but she was something better, for she was truthful and conscientious. She exerted herself to the utmost under the direction of her new governess.

“ I fear you'll find me very stupid, Miss Westford,” she said ; “ but I hope you'll believe that I shall do my best.”

“ I am sure you will,” Violet answered gently.

From that moment it seemed as if a friendship arose between the governess and her pupil. Theodosia had been accustomed to find herself neglected by the masters and governesses whom her

mother engaged, and who speedily discovered that the lively Anastasia was Mrs. Trevor's favourite, and that attention bestowed upon her would be better rewarded than if given to the quiet Theodosia.

Theodosia and her mother were never very likely to agree, for the girl's high sense of truth and honour was continually being wounded by the widow's conduct; and as Theodosia was too candid to conceal her sentiments, perpetual disputes arose between them.

Anastasia, on the contrary, was the exact counterpart of her mother, and the two agreed admirably, except when their interests clashed, which was not a rare event.

Day after day Violet toiled in the dull school-room at Mrs. Trevor's villa. Her duties were excessively fatiguing, but no murmur of complaint ever crossed her lips. When Saturday came she was able to carry home her hard-earned

half-guinea, and that in itself was a recompense for all her trouble.

In the mean time affairs had brightened a little for Lionel, who had at last succeeded in getting some work as a copyist of legal documents.

It was very hard work, very poorly paid; but for the sake of his mother and sister the young man would even have swept a crossing.

For some little time matters went on tolerably smoothly in the humble lodging. Mrs. Westford bent over an embroidery frame with untiring patience; Lionel laboured for long hours at his wearisome penmanship; and Violet attended daily at Mrs. Trevor's villa. So that, comforted by affection, which brightens even the dullest home, the widow and her orphans were comparatively happy.

But that period of peace was destined to be very brief. The storm was near at hand; and Violet, the gentle Violet, who until the last few

months had never known sorrow, was the first to be stricken by the thunderbolt.

She had been teaching Mrs. Trevor's daughters for nearly six weeks, when one day the widow sent her a very condescending message inviting her to a small evening-party, which was to take place during the week.

Of course Violet accepted the invitation. Painful as it would be to her to appear once more amongst careless and happy people, she feared to offend her employer by a refusal. She knew full well that she was invited to this party in order that she might be useful in showing off her pupils; and that any refusal on her part would inevitably be resented.

Anastasia sang Rossini's and Verdi's music very brilliantly, and Violet would be required to accompany her on the piano. Theodosia had a fine contralto voice, and sang simple ballads with a great deal of expression; but it was a question if

she would be allowed to sing before company. Mrs. Trevor did not care to see her younger daughter admired. She was jealous of all praise that was not bestowed upon herself or her favourite Anastasia. But Violet was determined that, if possible, Theodosia should sing one of her simple ballads in the course of the evening. She had taken a great deal of trouble with her younger pupil's voice, and was anxious that Mrs. Trevor should be made aware of Theodosia's rapid improvement. But it was no pride in her own teaching that made Violet anxious for this,—it was because she had really grown attached to her pupil.

With Anastasia it was quite different. That young lady was resolved to display her accomplishments to the uttermost, and had perfect confidence in her own powers.

The eventful evening arrived. Violet was dressed very simply, in deep mourning. But her

fair face and golden hair were set off by her sombre dress, and she looked very lovely. Anastasia Trevor was by no means pleased to see the notice which the governess attracted as she made her way quietly and shyly through the crowd in the endeavour to reach her hostess. Miss Trevor was of the order of fast young ladies, and she had regarded Violet with a kind of benignant pity, as a creature utterly without "dash" or "style."

To be dashing was the chief desire of Miss Trevor's heart. She studied the *Court Circular* and the Parisian fashion-books; she formed herself and dressed herself after the model of the latest celebrity in the *haut monde*, and did not even blush to borrow a grace or a piquant eccentricity from some brilliant leader of the *demi monde*.

To-night she had taken more than usual pains with her costume, complaining loudly as she did so, of the extravagance and selfishness of her mother, who had ordered her own dress from a

Parisian milliner in Wigmore-street, while expecting her daughters to be satisfied with the achievements of a clever young person in Somers-town.

“I hate white tarlatane!” exclaimed Miss Trevor, as she stood before her mother’s cheval glass, putting the finishing touches to her dress. “It is all very well for mamma to lay down the law about girlish elegance and simplicity when she gives twenty guineas for a moire, and wears lace worth hundreds, in order to set herself off to the best advantage.”

The young lady looked very discontentedly at the airy puffings of her dress, which was dotted all over with dew-spangled rose-buds, and which was very becoming to the dark-haired beauty, but by no means the costume she would have chosen had she been permitted to consult Madame Forchère, of Wigmore-street. Nor was her temper at all improved when she saw the glances

of admiring surprise which greeted Violet Westford as she made her way through the crowded room.

Mrs. Montague Trevor's drawing-rooms blazed with the light of a hundred wax candles. The elegant widow would not admit anything so vulgar and commonplace as gas into her apartments, so they were lighted entirely by wax candles, in branches of crystal and ormolu.

The rooms were crowded to suffocation when Violet arrived. When Mrs. Trevor talked of giving a small evening-party, her friends always knew very well that her rooms and staircase would be made insufferable by the crowd assembled at the villa, and that the elegant supper would be a kind of lottery in which many speculators would draw blanks.

Such a moment as this was the pride and delight of Mrs. Trevor's life. Radiant in a train of pink moire, the rustling folds of which were

almost covered with flounces of point-lace, the handsome widow smiled upon her guests.

Among them she knew that there were several eligible men in a matrimonial point of view, and two of those eligible beings she had marked as her intended victims.

One of these was Rupert Godwin the banker, whom Mrs. Trevor hoped to win as a husband for herself.

She had been to a garden-party at Wilmington Hall, and had been agreeably impressed by the splendour of that old mansion and its surroundings, as well as by the extravagance of the arrangements.

The other was Sir Harold Ivry, the wealthy descendant of a family of ironfounders; a young man who was the possessor of a million of money, and whom the widow fancied she might secure for her favourite daughter.

Anastasia was handsome and accomplished;

Sir Harold was young and independent. Why should not a match be brought about between them?

This was what Mrs. Trevor thought; and she looked with peculiar favour on the wealthy scion of the Birmingham ironmaster.

The manœuvring mother and the husband-hunting widow had a difficult part to play this evening, but the lady proved herself quite equal to the occasion. While engaged in a sentimental flirtation with the eligible banker, Mrs. Trevor contrived to keep a watchful eye upon Anastasia and the young Baronet.

Nothing could exceed her mortification when she saw that Sir Harold paid very little attention to Anastasia, and that he seemed peculiarly attracted by the beautiful but pensive-looking governess, whose mourning dress and lovely pale face were very conspicuous amid that gaily-attired crowd.

Mrs. Trevor bit her lower lip with suppressed rage and mortification, even while she appeared to be smiling her sweetest smiles at Rupert Godwin.

“It is too provoking,” she thought, as she kept a furtive watch upon the admiring glances which Sir Harold Ivry bestowed upon the governess. “I quite forgot that the creature is really remarkably pretty; and that mourning dress happens to suit her insipid complexion, and is, of course, worn on purpose to attract attention. What a fool I was to allow the artful minx to make her appearance amongst us to-night! But then I only thought of the use she would be to Anastasia, who always sings out of time when she accompanies herself.”

While Mrs. Montague Trevor was enduring all these secret tortures, poor Violet Westford was quite unconscious of the Baronet's admiring glances. She had seated herself in the quietest

corner of the back drawing-room, in a sheltered little nook between the grand-piano and a stand of hot-house flowers, and she was waiting patiently until her services should be required.

Sir Harold had approached her, and had made an attempt to enter into conversation with her, of course trying to break ground with some of the usual feeble truisms about the weather; but her brief and timid answers gave him little encouragement.

Violet Westford could not be at her ease in this crowded assemblage, where she felt instinctively that she was looked down upon as a poor dependent—a well-bred and accomplished drudge, whose very presence was forgotten, except at the moment when her services were required. She could not help thinking a little sadly of the last party at which she had been a guest,—a carpet-dance at the house of some old friends in Hampshire, people considerably above Mrs. Trevor in

position. She remembered the attention, the kindness, the praises that had been lavished upon her; and now she sat alone amongst a crowd, in which there was not one familiar face, except those of her employer and her two pupils.

At last, the eventful moment of the evening arrived for the manœuvring mother and her favourite daughter.

Violet took her place at the piano, and Anastasia prepared to commence an Italian bravura.

Miss Trevor cast a glance of triumph round the room. She was the heroine of the moment, and she knew that she was looking very handsome. Sir Harold was standing near the piano, and he was watching her with a thoughtful look in his candid eyes.

Anastasia fancied that thoughtful gaze could not be other than an admiring one; but she did not know very much of Sir Harold Ivry, who was a very peculiar young man, naturally re-

served, and not given to displaying his real feelings.

A murmur of admiration ran through the crowded drawing-rooms as Violet finished the symphony, so crisp and brilliant was her touch, and so correct her expression; and then Anastasia began her scena. Her voice was a soprano, very brilliant in quality, and highly cultivated; but though she sang well, the charm of feeling was wanting, and her singing seemed cold and colourless.

Mrs. Trevor had been seated in the front drawing-room talking to the banker; but she rose as Anastasia's voice rang out in the opening notes of the scena.

"You must hear my daughter sing, Mr. Godwin," she said. "I think you will acknowledge that her voice is fine, and her style perfection."

She led Rupert Godwin towards the archway between the two drawing-rooms. There were no

folding-doors, and only curtains of the airiest lace divided the two apartments.

Mrs. Trevor and the banker stood in the archway between the festoons of drooping lace.

The piano was at the other end of the room, and the faces of the singer and the accompanist were turned towards the archway.

Rupert Godwin's cheek grew paler than usual as he looked at the pensive face of the young governess. He had started at the first sight of that beautiful but melancholy countenance; but the gesture of surprise had been so slight as to escape the attention of Mrs. Trevor, who was gazing admiringly at her handsome daughter.

“Who is that young lady?” whispered the banker; “the young lady at the piano—the young lady in deep mourning?”

He asked the question with an eagerness that startled Mrs. Trevor, who was not a little offended at his inattention to her daughter's singing.

“That young lady who absorbs your attention so entirely is my daughters’ morning governess,” answered the widow with considerable asperity of tone.

“And her name?” demanded the banker.

“Her name is Westford—Violet Westford. She is in mourning for her father, a merchant captain, who was lost at sea.”

A slight shudder stirred Rupert Godwin’s frame, but it passed as quickly as the transient breath that ruffles the forest-leaves on a calm summer day.

Then a dark frown obscured his face.

“No child of Clara Westford’s shall succeed where I have power to hinder her success. When I bear a grudge, it is the great vendetta—war to the death against body and soul.”

This was the gist of Mr. Godwin’s thoughts as he looked with a strange, menacing gaze at the fair face of the girl at the piano.

“Westford!” he exclaimed. “And so your daughters’ governess is the daughter of Captain Westford. I am sorry for it.”

“Why so?” asked Mrs. Trevor, with a look of alarm.

“Because I am sincerely interested in the welfare and happiness of you and your daughters, my dear Mrs. Trevor; and I am sorry that the education of those charming girls should be intrusted to such a person as the daughter of Mrs. Westford.”

All this was said in the blandest tone. Mr. Godwin could appear the best and most benevolent of men when it suited his purpose to do so.

“You really terrify me out of my senses!” exclaimed Mrs. Trevor. “What can you mean? I had excellent references with Miss Westford. Pray explain yourself.”

“Not now; there are people about who may overhear what we say. To-morrow, my dear

Mrs. Trevor, or to-night even, if I find an opportunity, I will explain myself more fully."

Anastasia's Italian scena wound up with a brilliant cadence, whereupon her mother's guests fell into the usual ecstasies. And yet there were very few present who cared for showy Italian music except at an opera-house.

Some one asked Theodosia to sing. The girl would have refused; but before she could do so Violet whispered to her, "I know you will consent, dear, to please me;" and in the next moment the brilliant fingers flew over the keys in the sparkling symphony of an old English ballad.

Theodosia was truly attached to her new friend, and she drew near the piano, determined to do her best, however painful the task might be.

"Good gracious!" exclaimed Mrs. Trevor; "can I believe my eyes? Theodosia going to sing! She has a decent voice, poor child; but no style—no style whatever."

Nothing could be more contemptuous than the tone in which the mother said this. She did not like that Theodosia should attract attention which might have been bestowed upon Anastasia.

The first notes of the rich contralto voice were low and tremulous, but they swelled out presently in a burst of melody. The song was a very simple one—an old familiar ballad, “Auld Robin Gray;” but before Theodosia had finished the last verse, tears had bedewed the eyes of many listeners.

Anastasia’s brief triumph was entirely eclipsed. The praises which had been bestowed upon her had sounded cold and unreal compared to those now lavished on her sister. The vain girl could scarcely conceal her mortification, and her mother seemed almost equally annoyed.

“I should have been glad if you had asked my permission before you allowed Theodosia to sing, Miss Westford,” she said to Violet, in her

sharpest tones. "I consider her too young to display her accomplishments in a crowded room; and that old-fashioned ballad is better suited for a nursery ditty than for a drawing-room."

Sir Harold Ivry overheard this speech, and replied to it eagerly.

"Pray do not say that, my dear Mrs. Trevor!" he exclaimed. "Your youngest daughter's singing has drawn tears from our eyes, and has made us forget what hardened worldly creatures we are!"

He glanced admiringly at Theodosia as he spoke; but the next moment his eyes wandered to the beautiful face of Violet Westford, and with a still more admiring gaze.

"I am sure that Miss Theodosia Trevor owes a great deal to her governess," he said. And then in a lower voice he added to Violet, "Pray let us hear you sing."

Mrs. Trevor's brow darkened; but she could

not oppose the wishes of the Baronet, who was a privileged person in that house.

“ Will you persuade her, Mrs. Trevor?” he said. “ I feel that my entreaties will be useless. Pray ask Miss Westford to sing.”

The widow complied, and resumed all her accustomed sweetness of manner, as she requested Violet to grant the Baronet’s request.

Poor Violet was much too single-hearted to understand the sudden anger raging in Mrs. Trevor’s breast. She was entirely without affectation, and she consented to sing directly she was asked.

She sang one of Thomas Moore’s sweetest and most pensive ballads, “ Oft in the stilly night;” and again the eyes of almost every listener were wet with tears.

Her own eyes filled, as she remembered how often she had sung that ballad in her happy home, in the pleasant summer twilight, after dinner, or

in the winter dusk, when her lost father was near to listen and admire. Sir Harold Ivry saw those dark-blue eyes fill with tears, and he saw that it was only with a struggle that Violet could control her emotion.

He bent over her chair to thank her at the conclusion of the song.

“ But I fear the ballad has melancholy associations,” he added in a lower voice.

“ It has indeed ; for it recalls the dear father I have lost, and the memory of a home that is deserted.”

“ It is for your father, then, you wear that mourning dress ? O, forgive me, if I appear inquisitive. I am so deeply interested in all that concerns you.”

Violet looked up at the Baronet with a glance of innocent surprise. She was entirely without vanity, and she could not imagine why Sir Harold should be interested about her.

“ Yes,” she answered sadly ; “ I am in mourning for my father—the best father who ever made his children’s life happy.”

No more was said ; for Anastasia was about to sing again, and Violet was required at the piano.

Half an hour afterwards the crowd began to grow thin, and Violet obtained permission to retire. It was already past two o’clock ; for Mrs. Trevor’s little party had not begun until eleven, and the poor girl was anxious to return to the cheerless lodging where her mother was doubtless waiting up to receive her.

Violet noticed a peculiar stateliness in Mrs. Trevor’s manner as that lady wished her good-night ; but she was too tired even to wonder about that altered manner. She left the room very quietly, and went down to the hall, where she had left her cloak and bonnet in the care of one of the servants. She had refused to incur even the expense of a cab to bring her to Mrs. Trevor’s house,

for the luxury of that plebeian vehicle would have cost half a week's salary. She had preferred to hide her simple evening toilette under a heavy black cloak, and to make her way to the villa on foot.

She had just put on her bonnet and cloak when a light footstep sounded on the stairs, and in the next moment Sir Harold Ivry stood before her.

“I hope you will allow me to see you safely home, Miss Westford,” he said, with profound respect in his tone and manner. “I know you are alone here, and it will give me unbounded pleasure to conduct you safely to your home.”

Violet blushed; for in the happy days that were gone she had been accustomed to be handed to her carriage after a party or a ball.

She could not help feeling some touch of shame—false shame, if you will; but after that one instant of confusion, she answered boldly,

“ You are very kind, Sir Harold ; but I am going to walk home, and I believe my brother will be waiting outside to take care of me.”

“ Your brother !” exclaimed the Baronet, who was unable to conceal his disappointment. “ Then in that case I must surrender you to one who has the best possible right to protect you. But at least you will allow me to conduct you to your brother.”

He offered Violet his arm as he spoke, and she felt that she could not refuse to take it.

Sir Harold did not escort her very far, for Lionel was waiting at the end of the terrace, and to his care the Baronet was compelled to resign his precious charge.

We often hear and read of love at first sight, and certainly Sir Harold Ivry seemed to have fallen a victim to that sudden fever.

Violet could not do less than introduce him to her brother ; and for some little way they all three

walked on together; Sir Harold doing his best to make himself agreeable to Lionel.

It was a bright summer night, and a full moon was shining high in the cloudless heaven. Even London, so dingy in its usual aspect, looked romantic when seen by that soft silvery light.

But as Violet looked at her brother, a pang shot through her heart as she compared his worn and shabby attire with the costume of the rich young Baronet.

Lionel Westford still retained his gentlemanly bearing, but the awful stamp of poverty was upon him; and Violet's heart was wrung as she remembered the gay, dashing young Oxonian, to whom life had been one long summer holiday, disturbed by no harder toil than the study of an obscure passage in Euripides, or a week's training for the University boat-race.

It seemed as if that moonlight walk through

the streets of London was a most delightful thing to Sir Harold, for he went on, and on, until they were drawing near to Waterloo Bridge, when he stopped to say good-night, feeling that his companions might not wish him to know the humble quarter of the town in which they lived.

He had seen enough to understand that Violet and her brother had sunk from prosperity to poverty—poverty of the sharpest and bitterest kind, the poverty that must conceal itself under the mask of gentility.

He lingered, as he wished Violet good-night. It seemed as if he could scarcely tear himself away from her.

“I shall never forget your song,” he said; “it is ringing in my ears still—I shall never forget it; but I hope to hear you soon again.”

And then he was compelled to say good-night, for Lionel Westford’s manner repelled any approach to intimacy. Poverty had made the young

man proud. He, to whom pride had once been an unknown sentiment, was now almost haughty in his manner to strangers.

“How lovely she is!” thought Sir Harold, as he walked through the moonlit streets towards his chambers in the Albany. “How lovely she is! And what an air of high breeding there is in her every tone and gesture! And to think that such a woman should be poor, compelled to walk through the streets at three o’clock in the morning—compelled to put on her cloak at the bottom of a staircase, with half-a-dozen grinning flunkeys staring at her while she does it. It’s too bad—it’s shameful!”

Then, after a pause, the Baronet murmured, “While I am so rich; while I have thousands lying idle at my banker’s, and half-a-million in the public funds! But I will call on Mrs. Trevor to-morrow, and find out Miss Westford’s address. I will send her a thousand pounds anonymously. I will do something, no matter how desperate, even

at the risk of being kicked as an intrusive snob by that priggish young brother of hers, who was very stand-offish just now as he bade me good-night."

CHAPTER XIII.

A DAUGHTER'S TRIAL.

LATE though it was when she returned home after Mrs. Trevor's party, Violet knew that she must be punctual in her attendance on her pupils on the following morning. At eight o'clock she was walking westwards, after having taken her scanty breakfast at home. No refreshment had ever been offered to her at Mrs. Trevor's house, for the widow knew how to make the best of a good bargain; and liberal though she was in the matter of fine words and elegant compliments, she would have grudged her hard-working slave a cup of tea or a glass of indifferent sherry.

Nine was striking as Violet was admitted into the hall. She was about to proceed to the back-

staircase, which led to the schoolroom, when the man-of-all-work stopped her.

“ My missus wants to see you in her *boodore*,” he said, with the cool insolence with which a well-paid footman addresses an ill-paid governess; “ which it’s very important, and you wos to go upstairs immediate, and to look sharp about it.”

Violet was surprised at this summons, as Mrs. Trevor rarely rose until nearly mid-day, when it was her habit to sit sipping her chocolate and reading a novel until it was time to go out upon a round of fashionable visits; but, although the governess was surprised at this unexpected summons, she was in no way apprehensive of any unpleasantness in an interview with her employer.

Never had she looked brighter or prettier than when she presented herself before Mrs. Trevor, who had not long risen from her bed, and who sat untidily dressed in a loose morning-gown, at a well-furnished breakfast-table. The barrister’s

widow had acquired the tastes of an accomplished *gourmet* from her late husband, and was selecting the daintiest morsels out of a raised pie for her own consumption as Miss Westford entered the room.

Her favourite daughter Anastasia was sitting on the other side of the table, and a dark frown obscured that young lady's handsome face.

She had perceived the impression made by Violet Westford on Sir Harold Ivry, and she felt something nearly akin to hatred for the innocent girl whose charms had outrivalled her own.

Violet saw at a glance that something had happened to alter her position in the estimation of Mrs. and Miss Trevor ; but, as her conscience was entirely free from blame, she met the changed looks of the two ladies with a frank and fearless countenance.

“Miss Westford,” exclaimed Mrs. Trevor in the affected and high-flown manner which was

peculiar to her, "when you first entered this room, you entered the presence of a woman who is as confiding as a child. I saw you, and I liked you. You are beautiful; and I am a sensitive creature, to whom the presence of beautiful things is almost a necessity. You sought to enter my employment; I accepted your offer with confidence; I admitted you into my household; I trusted you with the care of my innocent girls; and now—now, when I had lulled myself to rest, believing in your truth and purity, I find that I have nourished a viper."

Violet started, and turned deadly pale. Never before had Captain Westford's daughter known what it was to receive an insult.

"Madam!" she exclaimed, with a sudden pride, which contrasted strangely with her usual gentleness, "you are mistaken in the person you address in this extraordinary manner."

"I wish I were," answered Mrs. Trevor,

shaking her head solemnly. "I wish I were indeed mistaken, and that I could awake from my delusion to find you worthy of my confidence."

"In what way have I proved myself unworthy of that confidence, madam?" asked Violet, with the same proud and fearless manner.

"O, Miss Westford," ejaculated the widow, raising her lace-bordered handkerchief to her eyes, with a sniff that was meant for a sob, "it is a sad case—a most painful case. It is not yourself against whom I have anything to say—except, indeed, that you have withheld the truth from me."

"I have withheld the truth, madam?" exclaimed Violet. "What truth have I withheld from you?"

"You entered my house under false pretences; you concealed from me the character of—your—unhappy mother."

At this point Mrs. Trevor made a pretence of being almost overcome by her emotion.

“The character of my mother!” cried Violet. “What should I tell you of her, madam, except that she is the best and dearest of mothers, and that I love her better than my life?”

“Unhappy girl! Do you pretend to be ignorant of your mother’s character prior to her marriage with your father?”

“Ignorant, madam! What should I know of my dear mother? Who is it that dares sully her name by so much as a whisper?”

“One who knows her only too well,” answered Mrs. Trevor. “Alas, poor child! I begin to think you may indeed be ignorant of the truth. And yet surely you must know the maiden name of your own mother?”

A vivid blush suddenly dyed Violet’s pale cheeks. For a moment a deadly fear—shadowy, shapeless, but terrible—took possession of her.

She had never been told the maiden name of her mother. More than this, she remembered that she had never heard that mother allude to any one circumstance of her early life. A dark veil of mystery had seemed to shroud that portion of Mrs. Westford's existence.

But the daughter's love was stronger than the base feeling of suspicion, that poisonous and fatal weed which at times twines itself about the purest and truest heart.

"I beg to resign my situation here this instant, Mrs. Trevor," Violet exclaimed indignantly. "If any one has dared to slander my mother in your hearing, I declare that person to be the falsest and basest of mankind. But, be it as it may, I will not stop an hour in a house where my mother's name has been sullied by the breath of suspicion."

"The person who told me your mother's sad story,—sad and shameful also, alas!" sighed

Mrs. Trevor, "is a person far too high in position to become the promoter of any idle slander. He spoke of facts—facts which I thought you might have been able to disprove; but you cannot do so. You cannot even tell me your mother's maiden name. But I can tell you that name, Miss Westford. Your mother's name was Ponsonby, and she was turned out of doors by her father, Sir John Ponsonby, when his heart had been almost broken by the disgrace which had fallen upon his daughter."

"What disgrace, madam?"

Mrs. Trevor was silent. Rupert Godwin had not chosen to tell her that he was the lover whose conduct had caused a cruel slander to blacken the name of Clara Ponsonby.

"What was that disgrace, madam?" repeated Violet. "I have a right to know the extent of the falsehoods that some wretch has dared to utter against the best and purest of women."

“Nay, child,” answered Mrs. Trevor, with affected sympathy, “enough has been said—more than enough! I pity your misfortune; for no misfortune can be greater than that of being the daughter of a worthless woman. I pity you, Miss Westford. But I am a mother myself; I have my own daughters to consider, and I cannot possibly allow you to enter this house again.”

“You cannot allow me, madam!” cried Violet, with passionate indignation. “Do you think my own feelings will allow me ever again to cross the threshold of a house in which my mother’s name has been so cruelly and pitilessly slandered? No, Mrs. Trevor! I wish you good-morning; and I can only trust that we may never again meet. You may have been deceived by your informant, but I cannot forgive you for being so ready to think ill of my dear mother.”

Having said this, Violet left the room, calm

and dignified in outward seeming, though her heart was almost bursting with the agony that tortured it.

Mrs. Trevor sat for some moments staring at the door by which the young girl had left her apartments, as if she could scarcely collect her scattered senses.

“Did you ever see such assurance, Anastasia?” she exclaimed at last. “If this penniless girl had been the Queen of England she could scarcely have answered me more proudly. However, we’ve got rid of her, that’s one comfort. It’s very lucky Rupert Godwin told me what he did, for I’m sure that designing creature would have set her cap at Sir Harold Ivry, and tried to supplant you, my pet. I had my eye upon her last night, though she little knew it, and I saw her artful manœuvres.”

Anastasia Trevor bit her lips with vexation as she remembered the events of the previous

evening—the evening which was to have been one long triumph to herself, and which had only resulted in bitter disappointment and humiliation. Hypocritical though we may be in our conduct to the world, we cannot deceive ourselves; and Anastasia knew only too well that Sir Harold's admiration had been freely and spontaneously given, and that Violet had been even unconscious of the impression she had made.

“There's one blessing,” exclaimed the fashionable Mrs. Trevor, after some minutes of meditation, “we save half a week's salary by this quarrel—though where we shall get such another governess for the same money, goodness only knows!”

CHAPTER XIV.

LOVE AT SIGHT.

WHILE Violet walked slowly homewards to the cheerless lodging in that dingy street near the Waterloo-road, a mail-phaeton dashed up to Mrs. Trevor's pretty villa, and Sir Harold Ivry alighted.

It was the fashionable hour for paying and receiving visits; so the widow and her favourite daughter were seated in the drawing-room, dressed exquisitely, prepared to fascinate any eligible marrying man who might fall in their way, for which favoured being the delights of social afternoon tea were specially reserved.

Anastasia was seated close to the window, pretending to be occupied by some fashionable Ber-

lin-wool work, but she watched the phaeton as it drew up to the door.

“Mamma!” she exclaimed, “it is Sir Harold!”

“Indeed!” cried Mrs. Trevor in triumphant tones. “Then you see last night’s party was not an unsuccessful affair after all. The Baronet must be smitten, or he would never be in such a hurry to call. I shall see you mistress of that splendid place in the North, my love, depend upon it.”

“That’s just like you, mamma!” exclaimed the petted Anastasia impatiently; “you always fancy that everything is going to happen just as you want it. I’m sure Sir Harold took no more notice of me last night than if I were the plainest gawky that ever emerged from a third-rate boarding-school. And I daresay he has only come to-day in the hope of seeing *that* Miss Westford.”

“What!” shrieked Mrs. Trevor, almost

hysterically. "You don't mean to tell me that Sir Harold would presume to come to my house for the purpose of paying his addresses to your governess! Nonsense, Anastasia, you are really too absurd."

No more could be said, for the Baronet was announced, and the two ladies turned to receive him with their brightest smiles.

"My dear Sir Harold, how very kind of you to call to-day!" exclaimed the widow.

"Your party was so charming, Mrs. Trevor, that I really could not delay coming to tell you how thoroughly I enjoyed myself, and to express a hope that neither you nor your daughters were fatigued by your exertions in our behalf," answered the young man. "How magnificently Miss Trevor sang!" he added, bowing to Anastasia; "and Miss Theodosia; and that other young lady, Miss Westford—what a lovely voice she has!"

Anastasia crimsoned with anger. The Baronet

did not even attempt to conceal his admiration of Violet. Mrs. Trevor's indignation knew no bounds, and yet she contrived to smile sweetly at the Baronet.

Nil desperandum is the motto of every manœuvring mother; and Mrs. Trevor was by no means disposed to abandon her hopes at the first disappointment. Even though Sir Harold admired the penniless governess, a little clever management and an unlimited amount of flattery might change the current of his fancies and bring him to the feet of Anastasia.

This is what Mrs. Trevor thought; and this hope inspired her with heroic courage.

The Baronet talked of general subjects for some little time. He discussed the operas, the picture-galleries, the botanical fêtes, the delights of a Sunday afternoon at the "Zoo," the Toxophilite Society's field-days in the neighbouring park, and the movements of the Royal Family, in the most

conventional strain of polite commonplace; but Mrs. Trevor could see that he talked at random, and that he was thinking of other subjects than those in which he pretended to be interested. At last he broke out suddenly, without any reference to his previous conversation :

“What a charming girl that Miss Westford is! I never saw any one I so much admired. She is so lovely, so modest, so completely unconscious of her own beauty! She is really the most bewitching creature I ever beheld; and O, my dear Mrs. Trevor, if you wish to render me your grateful and devoted slave, pray introduce me to that charming girl’s family! I want so much to know them, that I may have the opportunity of seeing more of her.”

“Sir Harold, I really am at a loss to—”

“O, pray do not misunderstand me, my dear Mrs. Trevor. You surely cannot think that I should feel any less respect for that sweet girl be-

cause I find her in a dependent position,—going away from a party on foot, and all that kind of thing. No, Mrs. Trevor, I am not the man to be influenced by any consideration of that sort. I am no aristocrat, as you and all the world know very well indeed. My father won his position by sheer hard work, and there's a blundering old wheelbarrow kept in a lumber-room at Ivry Place which my grandfather used to wheel when he was a navvy, and helped to make the Slopsall Canal down in our county. So, you see, it wouldn't do for me to give myself airs. I am rich, independent, and can afford to marry the woman I love, if I am only so happy as to win her regard. Under these circumstances, Mrs. Trevor, I am sure you will believe me when I declare the honourable nature of my intentions with regard to Miss Westford; and I know you are just the kind of warm-hearted woman to be fond of that feminine amusement called match-making. You'll

not refuse to introduce me to her family, will you now?"

No words can describe Mrs. Trevor's rage and mortification as she listened to this speech. Here was the wealthy Baronet, whom she had intended to win as a husband for her own daughter, utterly indifferent to Anastasia's charms, and ready to throw himself at the feet of a friendless orphan girl whom he had only seen once in his life. The fashionable widow was past-mistress of all the hypocrisies of polished society. She contrived, therefore, to conceal her aggravation, and looked at Sir Harold with a countenance expressive only of the most profound sympathy.

"My dear Sir Harold," she exclaimed, with a long-drawn sigh, "I pity you—I do indeed pity you. Nothing could be more charming than the sentiments which you so eloquently express. I only regret that they should be wasted upon an unworthy object."

“ An unworthy object, Mrs. Trevor !” cried the Baronet; “ what do you mean ?”

“ I have only this morning dismissed Miss Westford from my employment as an unfit associate for my dear children.”

Annabella Trevor gave a little shiver of horror as she spoke. The Baronet turned pale, and the widow saw that her poisoned arrow had gone home to its mark.

“ You dismissed her !” exclaimed Sir Harold. “ An unfit associate ! But how ?”

“ *That* I decline to tell you,” answered Mrs. Trevor with supreme dignity. “ There are secrets which no honourable woman can ever bring herself to reveal. I will not sully my lips by repeating what has passed between Miss Westford and myself. It is enough for you to know that she was dismissed from this house—and in disgrace.”

“ But the nature of that disgrace, Mrs. Tre-

vor?" asked the Baronet in an almost imploring tone.

"*That*, I must repeat, I decline to tell you; and I must beg you, as a gentleman, not to press the question," answered the lady with dignity. "Surely, Sir Harold, you cannot doubt my word?"

"Doubt you, Mrs. Trevor! O, no, no. What motive could you possibly have for blighting the fair fame of this poor girl? I *cannot* doubt you. But the blow is very bitter to me. A few days ago I should have ridiculed the mere idea of love at first sight; and yet I believe, upon my word, that I am as deeply attached to Miss Westford as if I had known her for half a lifetime. And to discover that she is unworthy of an honest man's regard! O, Mrs. Trevor, you cannot imagine how cruelly I feel this disappointment!"

In his almost boyish candour the Baronet made no attempt to conceal the state of his feelings.

Anastasia looked at him with mingled contempt and anger. She had always envied and disliked Violet Westford for her superior beauty; but now she hated her with as fierce a hatred as ever raged in a woman's breast.

Sir Harold Ivry rose to take leave.

“ I fear I have made a fool of myself, and that you must really despise me, ladies,” he said, blushing crimson, as he remembered the emotion he had betrayed; “ but I am a spoiled child of fortune, and I am not used to disappointment—and I am the worst possible hand at keeping a secret. Forgive me for having bored you with my affairs. Good-morning.”

He shook hands with both the ladies, and was about to leave; but Mrs. Trevor was not inclined to let him escape so easily.

“ You will dine with us to-morrow evening, I hope, Sir Harold, and escort us to Covent Garden, where my dear friend Lady Mordaunt has given

me her box. Pray don't say you are engaged elsewhere. Anastasia knows you are an excellent musical critic, and wants to hear your opinion of the new opera."

The young man hesitated for some moments, but at last accepted the invitation.

He did not do so from any regard for Mrs. Trevor or her daughter, but because he still cherished the hope that from them he should discover the truth about Violet Westford. He left the house very much depressed and disheartened by what he had heard, and ashamed of his impetuous devotion, now that he had been told that its object was base and unworthy. He had been accustomed to find life the pleasantest, easiest kind of affair, like a royal progress by special train, with a saloon-carriage fitted by Jackson and Graham to repose in, and all the stations draped with red cloth and festooned with garlands in honour of the favoured traveller. To-day, for the first time,

he discovered that there is happiness which wealth cannot purchase, and his disappointment was even keener than that of the young spendthrift, who wanted a box for the opera on one of Jenny Lind's field-nights, and offered a hundred pounds for the object of his desire, only to be told that it was impossible of attainment even at that price; whereupon he left Mr. Mitchell's shop, murmuring dolefully, "By Jove, there's something that money won't buy!"

CHAPTER XV.

VIOLET RESOLVES UPON ENTERING A NEW SPHERE.

A CLOUD fell upon the little household in the purlieus of the Waterloo-road. Violet sought for fresh employment, but in vain. She was incapable of uttering a falsehood, and she did not attempt to conceal the fact of her having lately quitted Mrs. Montague Trevor's employment.

In every case she was asked for a reference to her late employer, and when she refused to refer to Mrs. Trevor, people shook their heads. The case looked suspicious, and no one would have anything to say to the helpless girl, whose youth and beauty were additional obstacles to her success.

Thus Violet found herself with a blighted cha-

racter, helpless and friendless, in the vast city of London.

Now for the first time the poor girl's heart failed ; her courage gave way. Her enforced idleness gave her time for thought, and she sat brooding upon her fate for hours together, until a profound melancholy took possession of her.

She had lost so much—a doating father ; a betrothed lover, in whom she had so fondly trusted—it was scarcely strange that she should feel her life very hopeless and desolate, even though her mother and Lionel were still left to her.

Once, and once only, she had written to George Stanmore, at the Poste Restante, Bruges. She had written to him, telling him of her father's death, and the sad changes of fortune which had followed that calamity. In a spirit of mingled pride and generosity she had released her lover from the engagement that bound him to her.

No answer had come to that letter. Violet could only imagine that Mr. Stanmore had left Bruges, or that he accepted her release in silence. The pain of this thought was very bitter; but Violet Westford was becoming used to sorrow. Neither her mother nor Lionel suspected the existence of that hidden grief, which made a dull aching anguish in the girl's breast.

And in the mean time they were poor, very poor. Toil as she might with her skilful needle Clara Westford could earn very little towards the support of that small household; and Lionel's earnings as a copyist of law-papers were very uncertain. It was only by the most unfailing economy that this once prosperous family were able to pay the rent of the pitiful lodging, and obtain the commonest necessaries of life.

To Violet enforced idleness was almost insupportable. She saw those she loved toiling through the long weary days—hot summer days, whose

sunshine brought back the remembrance of the shadowy gardens about the Grange, the cool depths of the forest, those deep and sheltered glades in which she had spent such careless hours of happiness with George Stanmore. When she saw her mother and Lionel toiling in their close, dingy London lodging, and felt that she could do nothing to help them, despair took possession of her heart.

Every day she answered fresh advertisements in the *Times* newspaper, the hire of which from a neighbouring stationer cost her a penny a day. Every day she walked weary miles, in order to form one of the crowd of helpless girls, highly educated and tenderly reared, whom the iron hand of poverty has thrust out upon the hard world of London.

But her perseverance was of no avail. Without a reference to her former employer, no one would venture to trust in her. Even her beauty

—that gift so precious for the pampered child of a luxurious home—became an impediment to her success, and gave rise to cruel suspicions about her in the minds of the worldly-wise.

She had doubtless been dismissed from her last situation because of some imprudence—or perhaps something worse than imprudence—which rendered her unfit to be the companion and guardian of innocence.

After efforts that would have almost exhausted the patience of a martyr, Violet's hope and courage at last failed her altogether, and she gave up all thought of obtaining another situation. She was crushed and bowed to the very earth under the burden of despair.

It was on a glorious day in August that this sense of utter hopelessness took possession of her mind. She had walked to Hampstead that morning, after breakfasting on a little dry bread and a teacupful of milk. She had walked from the

Waterloo-road to the breezy Heath at Hampstead, and had presented herself before noon at a pretentious villa, only to be told by its prosperous mistress that she was a great deal too young for the situation.

“There was no age stated in the advertisement, madam,” poor Violet pleaded almost piteously; “and I can assure you that I possess all the accomplishments required, or I should not have applied for the situation.”

“Very likely,” answered the lady of the villa, who was the wife of an ironmonger at the West-end; “very likely you have a school-girl’s smattering of the accomplishments I require; but I could not possibly intrust my children’s education to a person of your age, and I really consider it almost an impertinence in a girl of nineteen to apply for such a position as governess in a house of this kind.”

The lady tossed her head contemptuously as

she uttered this speech. Had there been one spark of womanly feeling in her breast, she might have seen that poor Violet was well-nigh exhausted from sheer fatigue, and ready to drop fainting to the floor. She might have seen the mute anguish portrayed in the girl's face; and she might at least have offered a glass of wine from her well-stocked cellar, and a few words of sympathy and comfort from one Christian woman to another.

“Alas for the rarity of Christian charity” in this hard world! The lady of the villa only rang the bell, and desired her servant to show the “young person” out. Poor Violet found a seat upon the Heath, where she was able to rest for some time, in order to regain strength for the long homeward walk. There was no occasion for haste; why should she hurry home, when she had no good tidings for those whom she loved? She had only the old cruel story to tell—the story of failure and disappointment.

She sat for a long time, gazing dreamily at the dark roofs and steeples of the city, which were half hidden under a cloud of smoke in the valley beneath her. Then at last she rose, and walked slowly and despondently homewards.

The walk was a very long one; and the way she went took her across Long-acre and into Bow-street, which she entered at about three o'clock in the afternoon, dusty with her long walk in the high-road, pale and exhausted with fatigue.

Bow-street was very busy at this hour of the afternoon. A series of cheap performances were being given at the close of the Covent-Garden opera-season, and people were buying tickets and engaging boxes for the night's entertainment.

Bow-street is the centre of the theatrical world of London. In this street the dramatic agents have their offices, and to those offices flock all classes of the theatrical profession, from the provincial Macready who is only waiting to get an

innings in order to set the town in a blaze, and who enters the official chamber with a pompous tragedy stalk, to the timid amateur aspirant for dramatic fame who has never yet set foot upon a public stage, and who announces his approach by a faint nervous cough, expressive of profound self-abasement.

The street is redolent of the footlights. Here the theatrical wigmaker exhibits the flowing *chevelure* of roistering Charles Stuart—that supreme favourite of *vaudeville* and *commedietta*—side by side with the oily locks of *Tartuffe*, or the close-cropped poll of Jack Sheppard. There the theatrical hosier displays the sacred mysteries of his art, and treacherously reveals the means by which art and cotton-wool can supply the deficiencies of nature. Close at hand the theatrical gold-lace maker sets forth his glittering wares, and allows the vulgar eye to gloat upon the diadem of a Richard, and the jewelled sword-hilt of a Romeo.

Next door hang Beauty's robes, limp and dowdy of aspect when untenanted by their fair mistress. Everywhere the specialty of the street reveals itself.

Walking slowly down this street, Violet Westford glanced, in sheer absence of mind, at the big brass-plate upon the door of a dramatic agent's offices.

A dramatic agent! It was only after a few moments' reflection that she understood what the term meant.

A dramatic agent, of course, must be a person whose business it is to procure situations for actors and actresses.

A sudden and desperate fancy entered Violet's brain. She knew that people earned money, sometimes a great deal of money, by acting. She had read novels in which lovely young creatures with a taste for histrionics had walked straight from their domestic retirement on to the stage of Drury-

lane, to take the town by storm on their first appearance, and to be the delight and glory of the universe, until prevailed upon to exchange the triumphs of the drama for the social successes of fashionable life by an adoring duke, who languishes to lay his strawberry leaves and rent-roll at their feet.

Why should she not be an actress? She was rejected on every side as a governess. In her despair, she would have been almost willing to have swept a crossing, if by so doing she might have helped her mother and Lionel.

Why should she not be an actress? The thought was not quite so wild as it seemed. Violet Westford had often acted in amateur theatricals in pleasant country-houses near the Grange, and at merry Christmas gatherings in her own home. She had shown considerable talent upon these occasions, and had been much admired and applauded for that talent, and she had no idea of

the width of that gulf which divides the clever young actress of the domestic charade from the hard-working artist who woos public favour.

She remembered her social successes—not with any feeling of vanity, but as one last wild hope, to which in the depth of her despair she was ready to cling, as the drowning sailor clings to the frailest plank that ever floated on a blustrous ocean.

Acting on the impulse of the moment, she seemed inspired by a boldness that was strange to her. She entered the open doorway by which she had seen the brass-plate, and went up an uncarpeted staircase leading to the first-floor. Here she saw the word “office” painted upon a door opposite to her. She knocked timidly, and a voice, that sounded harsh and abrupt in her unaccustomed ears, told her to enter.

She went into the room, and found herself in the presence of a man of about five-and-thirty

years of age, who was sitting at a table writing, with a heap of papers, open letters, and many-coloured playbills lying about him.

The walls of the room were adorned with big rainbow-hued playbills and theatrical portraits. In one of the curtainless windows a foppishly-dressed man was lounging, with his back to the interior of the room.

The agent looked up from his writing, and bowed to Violet; but he did not speak. He evidently waited for her to state her business.

The poor girl's courage failed her all at once. Physically exhausted by her long and weary walk, she was not capable of any very heroic mental effort. She dropped into the chair to which the agent pointed. Her lips moved tremulously; but she could not speak.

Fortunately, the agent was by no means an ill-natured man. He saw Violet's embarrassment, and came to her relief.

“ You want an engagement, I suppose ?” he said.

“ Yes,” faltered Violet.

“ Very good. You’ve brought some bills with you, I suppose ?”

“ Bills, sir ? I—”

“ Yes ; bills from the theatre where you were last engaged. What’s your line of business ? The juvenile lead, I suppose, or first walking-ladies, hay ? Where have you been acting lately ?”

Violet shook her head.

“ I have never acted in any theatre,” she said.

“ I have only acted in private theatricals at the houses of my friends.”

“ What !” cried the agent. “ Do you mean to say you’ve never acted on a public stage ?”

“ Never.”

Mr. Henry de Lancy, the agent, who had been born a Higgins, gave a long whistle, expressive of extreme surprise.

“Then you’re a regular amateur, my dear girl,” he said, “and as ignorant as a baby. I don’t suppose the manager of any theatre in England would care to engage you—unless you were willing to go for a month or so on trial, without any salary.”

Without any salary! Violet’s heart sank in her breast. It was the salary, and the salary alone, she wanted. She did not wish to exhibit herself before a gaping crowd. She only wanted to earn money for those she loved.

“You don’t seem to like the idea,” said Mr. de Lancy. “Most young ladies like you are very glad to get the chance of acting, and would often be willing even to pay for it. Indeed, there are many of them who do pay—and pretty stiffly too.”

“Perhaps so,” Violet answered sadly; “but I am very poor, and I want to earn money. I thought that I could get a salary as an actress.”

“And so you can, my dear, when you’ve learnt how to act; but acting is an art, like every other art, and must be learnt by experience. If you like to go to some little country theatre, and play small parts for a couple of months without any payment, in order to get a little accustomed to your business, I’ll look over my books and see if I can manage the matter for you.”

“A country theatre, sir!” exclaimed Violet, “and no salary! O, that is quite useless for me. I want to be in London, with my mother, and I *must* earn money.”

The agent flung himself back in his chair with a half-contemptuous shrug of his shoulders.

“You want impossibilities, my dear young lady,” he said. “I can’t be of any use to you. Good-afternoon.”

He dipped his pen in the ink, and went on with his writing. Violet rose to leave the room. She began to think that the career of an actress

must be attended with as many difficulties as that of a governess.

But as she stood on the threshold of the door, the man who had been lounging in the window, and who had turned round to stare at her during this brief scene, suddenly addressed her.

“Stop a bit, my dear,” he said. “Just sit down five minutes, will you?—De Lancy, my boy, what a fool you are!” he added, addressing the agent.

Mr. De Lancy looked up from his writing.

“What do you mean?” he asked.

“Why, what a confounded fool you must be not to see that this young lady is the very person we want at the Cir!”

“The Cir” was an abbreviation of the Circenses; and this gentleman was no less an individual than Mr. Maltravers, the stage-manager of the Circenses Theatre.

“What for?” asked the agent.

“Why, for the Queen of Beauty, to be sure,

in the new burlesque. Haven't I been hunting all over London for a pretty girl, and haven't you sent me all sorts of guys and dowdies to apply for the situation? and isn't this young lady Venus herself in a straw bonnet?"

Violet blushed crimson. The stage-manager smiled as he perceived her confusion.

"You'll get used to this sort of thing by and by, my dear," he said. "Now, let us understand each other. You want to be engaged at a London theatre?"

"I do, sir."

"And you've never been on any stage in your life?"

"Never."

"Then all I can tell you is this: the first moment you tried to open those pretty lips of yours before a London audience you would find it almost as difficult to speak three words as if you had been born deaf and dumb. You think because

you've read Shakespeare, and acted in a charade now and then among your friends, that you only want a chance in order to burst upon the world as a modern Siddons. But that kind of thing is not quite so easy as you imagine. No, my dear young lady, acting isn't an accomplishment that comes natural to people, any more than playing the piano, or painting pictures, or speaking foreign languages. Acting must be learnt, my dear, and it isn't learnt in a day."

Violet looked despairingly at the speaker, who said all this in the airiest and pleasantest manner.

"What am I to do, then, sir?" she asked piteously. "I have no time to learn an art. I want to earn money, and at once."

"And you shall earn some money, my dear, and very easily too," replied the stage-manager.

"O, sir, tell me what you mean!" exclaimed Violet, who was bewildered by the stage-manager's vivacity.

“What would you say if I were to pay you eighteen shillings a week for sitting in a golden temple for ten minutes every night, in one of the most splendid dresses that was ever made in a theatre? What would you say to appearing as the Queen of Beauty in the last scene of our burlesque? You’ll have nothing to say; you’ll have nothing to do, but sit still and allow the audience to admire you; and you will be paid the liberal sum of eighteen shillings a week. What do you say, young lady? Do you accept my offer?”

“O yes, yes; most willingly,” answered Violet.

Eighteen shillings a week—nearly double the amount of Mrs. Trevor’s miserable salary! Violet was only too eager to secure so much prosperity.

“I accept your offer, and with gratitude!” she exclaimed.

Then, suddenly, the flush of excitement faded

from her face, and she grew very pale. Would her mother and Lionel—proud, high-spirited Lionel—would those two, who loved her so dearly, ever consent that she should earn money in this manner? Could the young Oxonian—so quick to feel the humiliation of those he loved—permit his sister to be stared at by an audience who paid for the privilege of criticising or admiring her?

“Surely, when we are so poor, they would scarcely object to any honest means by which I could earn money,” Violet thought.

But she dared not decide the question without her mother's permission.

“Will you give me time to consult my friends?” she said. “I was too hasty in what I said just now. I cannot accept your offer without my mother's consent.”

“Very right and proper,” answered the stage-manager approvingly. “But you must get your mother's permission between this and eleven o'clock

to-morrow morning, or I shall be obliged to find another young lady for the Queen of Beauty. I suppose you can come to me at the theatre by half-past ten o'clock to-morrow?"

"Yes, sir."

"Very well, then; there's my card. You must go to the stage-door, and if you give that to the door-keeper, he'll send you to me directly. Mind you are punctual, for there are plenty of people anxious for the situation. All the ugliest ballet-girls in London fancy themselves the very thing for the Queen of Beauty."

Violet promised to be punctual. There was a fee due to Mr. de Lancy; but when that gentleman found the poor girl was penniless, he very good-naturedly volunteered to wait until she had received her first week's salary.

Violet hurried homewards after this interview, rejoiced beyond measure at having the chance of help held out to her. She told her mother and

Lionel of what had happened, and implored them to lay aside all prejudice at a time when poverty in its worst bitterness had entered their household.

At first, both Mrs. Westford and Lionel were strongly averse to her proposition; but little by little the girl won their consent.

Lionel's concurrence was given unwillingly, even at the last; it stung him to the very quick to think that his sister should be obliged to earn money by exhibiting her lovely face to a careless, perhaps insolent crowd. But when he looked at his mother's careworn countenance, the beautiful lines of which were already sharpened by the cruel hand of want, his courage gave way, and he burst into a passion of tears—those tears which seem so terrible when they flow from the eyes of a brave man.

“Do as you will, Violet!” he exclaimed, dashing those bitter drops away with a hasty, passionate gesture. “How can we refuse the

help of your feeble hands? I am a man; I have received an education which cost my father a small fortune; and yet, work as I may, I cannot earn enough to keep my mother and sister from penury."

Thus it was that Violet presented herself at the stage-door of the Circenses at the appointed hour on the following morning.

CHAPTER XVI.

BEHIND THE SCENES.

To Violet Westford scarcely anything could have been more trying than the ordeal which she now had to undergo. What scene could be more strange to this delicate-minded, home-bred, carefully-nurtured girl than the busy world behind the curtain in a great London theatre?

The door-keeper of the Circenses received the card which she presented to him, and, after uttering some half-sulky, half-insolent remark, gave her into the charge of a dirty boy, who was to take her upstairs to the stage, where she would find Mr. Maltravers, the stage-manager.

Poor Violet was almost bewildered by the many dark passages along which her conductor led her.

There seemed scarcely a gleam of the summer sunlight in all the great building, and the underground passages smelt like vaults or charnel-houses—charnel-houses in which there was a perpetual escape of gas, mingled with that odour of corduroy and shoe-leather which the working-classes are apt to leave behind them, and which a very witty lady once spoke of as their *esprit de corps*.

At last the dirty boy led the way up a little break-neck staircase, opened a slamming wooden door, and ushered Violet into a corner, where crowds of shabbily-dressed men and women were lounging amongst heaps of piled-up scenery.

These men and women were the inferiors and subordinates of the company—the banner-bearers and supernumeraries who appear in grand processions, and the ill-paid girls who fill up the stage in crowded scenes.

Many of these girls were dressed neatly and plainly; others were distinguished by a tawdry

shabbiness—a cheap finery of costume ; but there were some girls whom Violet saw lounging together in little groups, whose attire would have scarcely seemed out of place upon women of rank and wealth—handsome girls, some of them ; and they looked at the stranger's shabby mourning dress with a supercilious stare.

Violet had to stand for some time amongst these different groups, waiting until it should please the stage-manager to come to her.

That gentleman was working as hard as it is possible for a man to work ; running from one side of the great stage to the other ; giving directions here, there, and everywhere ; abusing those whose stupidity or neglect annoyed him ; giving a hasty word of praise now and then ; answering questions, writing letters, correcting the rough proofs of playbills, looking at scenery ; stooping over the orchestra to say a few words to the *répétiteur* ; and appearing to do a dozen things at

once, so quickly did he pass from one task to another.

Little by little Violet became accustomed to the half-darkness of the place, which was only illumined by the glare of a row of lamps at the edge of the stage, technically known as the "float."

As she grew better able to distinguish objects around her, she felt still more keenly the strangeness of her position. The handsomely-attired girls stared at her, always with the same supercilious gaze; and at last one of them, after looking at her fixedly for some time, addressed her. She was a beautiful, dark-eyed, Jewish-looking girl, and her costume was more extravagant than that of any of her companions.

A train of mauve moire antique, bordered with a deep flounce of the richest black lace, trailed upon the dirty boards of the theatre. Over this dress the Jewess wore a lace shawl of the costliest description; and a small white-chip bonnet,

adorned with mauve feathers and silver butterflies, crowned her queen-like head.

She was a magnificent-looking woman—a woman who might have graced a throne; but there was something almost terrible in her beauty—something that sent a thrill of indefinable pain and terror through the heart of the thoughtful observer.

Her dark eyes had an ominous lustre; there was a hectic bloom upon her oval cheek, and that cheek, perfect though its outline still was, had a sunken look that presaged ill.

A physician would have said that the stamp of decay was upon this splendid creature, the foreshadowing of an early death.

“Pray, are you engaged here?” she asked of Violet; “because, unless you are engaged, you will not be allowed to stand in this wing. It is against the rules for strangers to hang about the theatre.”

There was an insolence in the girl's tone which aroused Violet Westford's innate dignity.

She replied very quietly, but with perfect self-possession.

"I am here because I have been told to come here," she said.

"By whom?"

"By Mr. Maltravers."

"O, indeed!" exclaimed the Jewess; "then in that case I suppose you are engaged?"

"I believe so."

"For what?"

"To appear in the new burlesque."

The Jewess flushed crimson, and an angry light gleamed in her splendid eyes.

"What!" she exclaimed, "then I suppose you are to be the Queen of Beauty in the grand tableau?"

"So Mr. Maltravers told me."

The Jewess laughed—a hollow laugh, that

was very painful to hear. To sit in the golden temple, as the representative of all that is lovely, the observed of all observers, had been Esther Vanberg's ambition. She was the handsomest girl in the theatre, and she fully expected to be chosen for this distinction. So when she found a stranger was about to be engaged, she flew to Mr. Maltravers, and complained to him bitterly of an arrangement which she declared to be a deliberate insult to herself.

The stage-manager was a thorough man of the world, accustomed to deal with all the different airs and graces of the company under his rule.

He shrugged his shoulders, paid the handsome Jewess some very high-flown compliments, but told her he wanted her to fill another part of the tableau, and that he must have a new lady for the Queen of Beauty.

The truth of the matter was, that in the

opinion of Mr. Maltravers the beauty of Esther Vanberg was on the wane. She was very well known to the regular audience at the Circenses, and, handsome though she was, people might be, perhaps, just a little tired of her beauty.

Beyond this, there was something in Esther's beauty that was almost demoniac in character—something which reflected the reckless wildness of her life and the violence of her temper. Mr. Maltravers had the eye of an artist. His taste in the composition of a stage picture was scarcely inferior to that of Vestris herself, beneath whose despotic sway he had served his apprenticeship in the art of stage management. For the central figure of his tableau he wanted a woman whose beauty should possess the charm of youth and innocence. Thus it was that he had been peculiarly struck by the appearance of Violet Westford. He was a hard, worldly-minded man of business, but he was devoted to the dramatic art,

and he held the interests of the theatre before every other consideration.

He came off the stage presently, and made his way to the spot where Esther and Violet were standing.

“ Good-morning, my dear,” he said to Violet, addressing her with a fatherly familiarity that was entirely free from impertinence. “ I’m very glad to see you. You’ve made up your mind to accept the engagement?”

“ Yes, sir.”

“ Very well, then ; go upstairs to the wardrobe—anyone will show you the way—and ask Mrs. Clements to measure you for your new dress. You can take this,” he added, scrawling a few words in pencil on the back of a card. “ Mrs. C. knows all about the dress. There, run along, that’s a good girl.”

Before Violet could reply, Mr. Maltravers had returned to the centre of the stage, and was busy

among the scene-shifters. A good-natured-looking, gentle-voiced girl, very simply but yet very neatly dressed, who had been sitting in a dark corner of the side-scenes working crochet, came forward and offered to conduct Violet to the wardrobe-room, and the two set out together.

It was a long journey—up staircases that seemed interminable to Violet; but at last they arrived at a great, bare, whitewashed apartment, immediately under the roof of the theatre—an apartment which was littered from one end to the other with scraps of gorgeous-hued satin and glittering tissue, spangles, ribbons, and gold-lace. About twenty women were at work here, and to one of these Violet was conducted.

Mr. Maltravers's card produced an immediate effect. The wardrobe-mistress left her work, and proceeded to take Violet's measure for the dress. She was in raptures with the young girl's appear-

ance, and told her she would look lovely in a robe of silver tissue, spangled with stars, and with draperies of rose-coloured crape.

“The dress will be perfection, miss, *perfection*, and will just suit your beautiful fair skin. Now don't you let any of the ballet-ladies persuade you to plaster your face with *blanc de perle*, or *blanc Rosati*, or *blanc de* something, as most of them do, until their faces have about as much expression as you'll see in a whitewashed wall. I shall take great pains with the costume, for I know Mr. Maltravers has set his heart upon the Temple of Beauty being a great success. My youngest little girl is to be one of the Cupids, and she does nothing but talk of it at home. She went on in last year's pantomime as the Singing Oyster, and did *so* well, bless her dear little heart !”

To Violet all this talk was utterly strange. Already she began to look forward with fear to her first appearance on a public stage ; but for the sake

of those she loved she would have dared more than the ordeal before her.

She went downstairs, and at the back of the stage met Mr. Maltravers, who told her to come at ten o'clock the next morning for the rehearsal of the new burlesque.

"O, by the by," he said, "what name shall I put down in the cast? You never told me your name."

"My name is Wes——," Violet began; but she stopped abruptly, remembering that the subordinate position she was about to occupy in that theatre would be a kind of disgrace to her lost father's name.

The stage-manager seemed to guess the nature of her scruples.

"You are not obliged to give me your real name, my dear," he said kindly; "if you like to take a false name, you can do so. Most actresses and ladies of the ballet assume false names; they

have generally some relations or friends who object to their appearance on the stage—straitlaced people, you know, who fancy that the stage-door is the entrance to a kind of Tophet.”

“You are very good, sir. I should not wish my position here to be known,” Violet faltered. “I honour and admire the dramatic art, and those who profess it; but as my position in the theatre will be a very humble one, I shall be glad to keep my name a secret. You can call me Watson, if you please, Mr. Maltravera.”

“Very well, my dear; so be it. You will be known here as Miss Watson. And don't you be put out if Esther Vanberg gives herself airs because you've been chosen for the best place in the tableau. You just attend to your business, and if Vanberg annoys you, come to me, and I'll take my lady down a peg or two.”

CHAPTER XVII.

CRUEL KINDNESS.

WHILE Violet began her lowly career at the Circenses, Lionel made a new effort to earn a few pounds. His powers as an artist were of no mean order, and he made a desperate attempt to turn his talents to some account. He gathered together a little bundle of sketches, some in water-colours, some in pen-and-ink, but all of them exhibiting considerable dash and talent: sporting sketches, military sketches, graceful groups *à la* Watteau, cavaliers in the ever-picturesque costume of the Restoration, all the work of happy hours at the Grange. With this bundle under his arm, Lionel Westford sallied forth one wet afternoon in quest of some enterprising dealer in art.

Never had the streets of London looked duller or dingier than they did to-day. There were few carriages even in the best thoroughfares, and the muddy foot-passengers who trod wearily upon the sloppy pavement seemed all of them more or less at odds with fortune.

Lionel Westford crossed Waterloo Bridge and made his way by different short cuts to Regent-street.

Here, as well as in the meaner quarters of the town, the foot-passengers might suffer all the inconvenience and discomfort of muddy pavements and perpetual rain; but pampered beauty, rolling here and there in her luxurious carriage, could descend therefrom to be sheltered by the huge umbrella held by a deferential footman, and to be escorted into a shop as elegantly and as comfortably furnished as a West-end drawing-room.

Lionel entered the shop of a fashionable print-

seller. It was comparatively empty, and he was able to make his way at once to the counter, where the principal was busily occupied sorting some engravings in a portfolio.

Three or four fashionable-looking men were lounging near the door, and glanced with supreme indifference at the shabbily-dressed stranger, whose threadbare coat and shining hat, dripping with rain, too palpably betrayed his poverty.

Lionel Westford approached the counter, and after a few preliminary words, opened his portfolio.

The printseller looked at the sketches readily enough. They were very clever, he said; they gave indications of great talent, but unluckily they were not wanted; there were plenty of such things to be had, done by the regular people.

Lionel Westford's cheek grew paler as he saw his last hope deserting him.

“Can you not give me some kind of employ-

ment?" he asked, with a feverish energy. "You think, perhaps, I shall want high prices for what I do. You are mistaken. I will work for starvation wages, and work untiringly—I only ask you to give me a chance."

The printseller shook his head decisively.

"Quite impossible," he said. "I have more of these kind of things in my stock than I shall be able to sell in a twelvemonth. Photography has quite superseded this kind of work. The fashion for scrap-books has gone out."

"But if I were to paint a more important picture—"

"There would be no market for it, my good young man. You must have some kind of reputation as an artist before you can expect your pictures to sell," answered the shopkeeper impatiently.

Lionel shut his portfolio, and turned away from the counter with a feeling of heart-sickness

in his breast. None, save those who have endured such disappointments, can tell their anguish.

His face was deadly pale; his lips contracted rigidly; and there was an angry look in his eyes. He was in the humour which would have sent a Frenchman on the first stage of that fatal journey which halts at the *filets de St. Cloud*, to make its dismal end in the darksome cells of the Morgue.

As he turned from the counter he found himself face to face with a woman—a woman whose beauty startled him by its splendour.

Never before had he seen a face that seemed to him so wondrous in its magical charm. It was not an English type of beauty. The large, almond-shaped eyes, darkly lustrous, yet soft and dewy even in their lustre, were like the eyes of a Madonna by Correggio. The rich complexion was foreign in its clear olive tint. The hair, simply dressed under a pink-crape bonnet, was

of that bluish black which a painter would choose for the massy tresses of an Assyrian queen.

This Spanish-looking divinity was dressed in the height of fashion and the perfection of taste, as it seemed to Lionel Westford, whose artistic eye took in every detail of her appearance, even in that dreary crisis of his fate. His own troubles and perplexities vanished out of his mind as he looked at this unknown beauty, and he was wholly absorbed by the painter's delight in loveliness of form and colour.

The young lady wore a dress of some silken material, in which violet and silvery gray were artfully intermingled. A priceless cashmere shawl draped her perfect figure, lending itself to those diagonal lines which are agreeable to the painter's eye. Close behind this brilliant demoiselle appeared a stout but very stately matron of the chaperone class—the kind of person created for domestic surveillance—the modern form under which the

dragon of the famous garden guards the unapproachable fruit.

Lionel Westford was scarcely conscious of this latter lady's presence. It was the young beauty whose sudden appearance bewildered him, as he turned away, despairing, from the printseller's counter.

He gazed for some moments upon the unknown beauty, dazzled by her splendour, and then passed hastily on. He wanted to leave the shop—he felt eager to withdraw himself from the influence of that beauteous face. It seemed to him as if there was something almost stifling in the atmosphere. What had he to do with such a creature as this pampered and doubtless high-bred beauty?—he, a beggar, an outcast, a kind of Pariah, by reason of his poverty?

He would have passed out of the shop; but, to his utter bewilderment, the fashionable beauty followed him towards the door, after a brief whispered

disputation with the elder lady, and laid her little gloved hand upon the damp sleeve of his shabby coat. The gesture was only momentary. The slim fingers touched him as lightly as a butterfly's wing; and yet a kind of thrill seemed to vibrate through his veins.

“Do not go just yet,” pleaded a low earnest voice; “I should be glad to speak with you for a few minutes.”

“I am quite at your service, madam.”

At her service! How cold and formal the words sounded as he uttered them! What was she to him but a stranger, whose face had shone upon him for the first time only five minutes ago? And yet he felt as if he could have surrendered his life to give her pleasure. He stood with his hat in his hand, waiting until she should address him.

If he was embarrassed, she was still more so. The rich crimson blood rushed to her cheeks—

the dark fringes drooped over her eyes. And yet the impulse that stirred her heart was only one of womanly compassion; it was pity alone that had impelled her to address Lionel Westford.

She had overheard his appeal to the shopkeeper. She had perceived from his tone and manner that he was a gentleman, unaccustomed to bitter struggles for daily bread. She had seen his white face, almost ghastly in its look of despair; and, with impulsive generosity, she had determined, if possible, to help him.

“You are very much in need of employment?” she said hesitatingly.

“My dearest Julia,” exclaimed the outraged matron, “this is really such a very unprecedented kind of proceeding, I must protest against such inconsiderate conduct.”

“My dear Mrs. Melville, for once in a way don't protest against anything: I am only going to speak to this gentleman about a matter of busi-

ness," returned the young lady, just a little impatiently.

"But, my dear Julia, your papa—"

"Papa always allows me to have my own way."

"But, my dear love, this per—this—ahem!—gentleman is an utter stranger to you."

All this was spoken in an undertone, but Lionel could perceive that the language of remonstrance was being addressed to the young lady by an outraged duenna, and he moved again towards the door, anxious to terminate an embarrassing situation.

The young lady's generous impulses were not to be subjugated by matronly caution.

She stopped Lionel once more as he was about to leave the shop.

"Pray do not hesitate to answer me," she said.

"I heard you say just now that you needed employment."

“I only said the truth, madam. I need it very much.”

“And would you be particular as to the nature of the employment, so long as it were tolerably remunerative?”

“Particular, madam!” exclaimed Lionel. “I would sweep a crossing in the muddy street yonder, or hold horses at the doors of the clubs. I would do anything that an honest man may do, in order to get bread for those I love.”

“For those you love!” repeated the lady. “You have a young wife, perhaps—or even children—whom you find it difficult to support?”

“O no, madam! I have no wife to reproach me for my poverty. The dear ones of whom I spoke are my mother and sister.”

“I think I could offer you remunerative employment,” said the Spanish beauty, still in the

same hesitating manner, "if the nature of it would not be unpleasant to you."

"Unpleasant to me, madam!" exclaimed Lionel. "Believe me, there is no fear of that. Pray speak—command me, in any way you please."

"I have an only brother," answered the lady, "who possesses the same talent as yourself. He is abroad now; and indeed we have been separated for some time; but we are truly attached to each other, and everything relating to him is sacred in my eyes. When he went away from home he left behind him a great quantity of sketches—things to which he attached no value, but which are very precious to me. I am anxious to get these drawings mounted by some one with artistic taste. I should be very glad if you would undertake the task. Our house in the country is a very large one; and I have no doubt papa would give you rooms in it while you were engaged in carry-

ing out my wishes. I will ask him to write to you on the subject, if you like. In the mean time, here is my card."

She opened an exquisitely-carved ivory case, and handed Lionel a card, while the outraged matron looked on in silence, with an air of wounded dignity that approached the tragic.

Her tone and manner throughout, even when she was most hesitating, seemed those of one accustomed to command. There was an imperious grandeur in her beauty, which contrasted strongly with her maidenly shyness in addressing a stranger.

The name which Lionel Westford read upon the card was

MISS GODWIN,

Wilmington Hall, Herts.

Miss Godwin of Wilmington Hall! Lionel Westford started, and recoiled a little from his lovely companion.

“I daresay you know my father’s name,” she said; “almost everybody knows Mr. Godwin the banker.”

“I don’t know what people would say if they knew Mr. Godwin’s daughter went about the world picking up strange young men in shops,” thought the matron.

Lionel faltered some few words in reply to Miss Godwin, but these words were not intelligible.

Rupert Godwin’s daughter! This girl who was anxious to be his patroness, his benefactress, was no other than the daughter of Rupert Godwin, his mother’s worst enemy!

Could he accept any favour from that man’s race? And, on the other hand, how could he now refuse this girl’s help, so generously offered, so eagerly accepted, a few moments before?

He was silent. He stood with the card in his hand, staring absently at the name inscribed upon

it, while a sharp mental struggle went on within his breast.

What was he to do? Was he, who so needed help, to reject this most unexpected succour, this friendly rope flung out to him at the moment when he was buffeting with waves that threatened his annihilation? Was he to refuse the help offered in this crisis of his life, in deference to a feeling which was, perhaps, after all, only a foolish prejudice?

He thought of his mother's broken home. He believed that Rupert Godwin had only acted as any other hard-headed, callous-hearted man of business might have done. But the memory of that desolate home was very vivid in his mind, and he had long ago learned to look upon the banker as a bitter enemy.

Yet he *could not* reject Julia Godwin's offer of assistance. The images of his mother and sister seemed to fade from his mind. He stood before

Julia Godwin bewildered by conflicting emotions, helpless as some creature under the influence of a spell.

“Shall I ask papa to write to you about terms and other arrangements? Will you consent to mount my brother’s sketches?” asked the soft voice, while the chaperone still looked on with the stony stare of amazement.

“Yes, I am at your service. I will do what you please,” answered Lionel.

“You are very good. And to what address shall papa write?”

The young man paused for a moment, and then named a post-office in a street near his lodging.

Julia Godwin wrote the address on the back of one of her cards with the jewelled pencil dangling amongst the costly toys at her watch-chain.

“And the name?” she asked.

“Lewis Wilton,” Lionel answered, after another brief pause.

He could only enter Rupert Godwin's house under a false name. Henceforward his independence would be gone, for there would be falsehood and dishonour in his life.

He felt this; and a sense of shame mingled with his delight in the thought that he and Julia Godwin would meet again.

“And now I am quite at your service, dear Mrs. Melville,” she said to her duenna, placidly ignoring the tempest of indignation with which the matron's breast had been swelling. “Yet stay, I had almost forgotten to make my purchases.”

She went to the counter, and bought some trifling articles, while Lionel waited to escort the two ladies to their carriage.

It was a very magnificent equipage; and the young man thought, as Julia Godwin bowed to him from the window, that she looked like some foreign princess, dazzling alike by her beauty and by the splendour of her surroundings.

He little knew that the infamous theft of his father's hardly-earned fortune had alone preserved that splendid equipage from the hands of infuriated creditors. He little knew that all his own sufferings were occasioned by the diabolical fraud which had enabled Rupert Godwin to stem the tide in his affairs and float into new enterprises that had brought him the command of money.

Yes; the twenty thousand pounds had saved the banker's commercial position, and had enabled him to enter upon new speculations, which had been singularly, almost miraculously, fortunate.

Lucifer sometimes favours his children. Harley Westford's money had been very *lucky* to Rupert Godwin.

And yet, hard and resolute as the banker's nature was, there were times when he would have gladly sacrificed all his position in the commercial world if he could have recalled the day upon which he first saw the captain of the Lily Queen.

Lionel stood on the muddy pavement, lingering until Godwin's carriage was quite out of sight.

Then he turned slowly away, and walked homeward; heedless of the fast-falling rain—almost unconscious of the way by which he went; entirely absorbed in thoughts of the lovely face that had so lately beamed upon him—the low musical voice which seemed still to sound in his ear.

But, think as he would of the beautiful Julia, he could not quite banish from his mind the memory of his mother's trials. What would she think of her only son, could she but know that he was about to accept service with the man who had rendered her home desolate, the man of whom she never spoke without a shudder of aversion?

“There is something horribly base in this business,” thought the young man. “False to Rupert Godwin, since I enter his house as a concealed enemy; false to my mother, whose natural

hatred of this man I must outrage by any dealings with him or his race. False every way! What can I do but despise myself for my meanness and folly? No!—come what may, I will not be so utterly weak and degraded. I will not enter the house of Rupert Godwin!”

But there is a Nemesis who guides the footsteps of the avenger. It was destined that Lionel Westford should enter Rupert Godwin’s house under a false name.

The hand of fatality pointed to Wilmington Hall. Harley Westford’s son was to go thither.

Chance seemed to have brought about that which was to be the first step in a long train of circumstances leading, slowly but surely, towards discovery and retribution.

Two days after his interview with Julia Godwin, Lionel called at the post-office, and received a letter from the banker.

It was brief, but not uncourteous :

“ SIR,—In accordance with my daughter’s request and recommendation, I am prepared to employ you for some weeks in the cleaning and mounting of my son’s sketches. The salary I can offer you is five guineas a week ; and you can be accommodated with rooms at my house.

“ I shall naturally expect a reference to some person of position who can testify to the respectability of your character and antecedents.

“ Yours obediently,

“ RUPERT GODWIN.

“ *Wilmington Hall, Herts.*”

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